

Peter Lawler’s “Faith-Based Straussianism” and the Science of Theology

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Abstract: In his most recent work, *Homeless and at Home in America*, Peter Lawler diagnoses our country’s twin intellectual impulses, libertarianism and Darwinism, as expressions of the modern, disjunctive soul; torn between the desire to conquer nature for the sake of individual autonomy and the inclination to scientifically deprivilege ourselves as merely another part of nature, many Americans have managed to incoherently embrace a kind of libertarian sociobiology. Lawler attempts to demonstrate that each perspective promises only a partial view of the truth and that a deeper anthropology that properly includes both our natural inclinations and our eros to transcend nature can be accounted for by what he calls a “Thomistic Realism.” The theoretical crux of this Thomistic realism is a “science of theology” that articulates the relation between reason and revelation, navigating between the mutual exclusivity espoused by Leo Strauss or any decisive theoretical synthesis. The purpose of this article is to fully explain the meaning of Lawler’s science of theology and the extent to which it is influenced by but ultimately departs from Strauss’s view.

Keywords: Darwinism, Peter Lawler, libertarianism, Leo Strauss, theology

A central paradox at the heart of modernity’s theoretical foundation is expressed emblematically by Locke’s ambiguous anthropology: On the one hand, man achieves collective self-aggrandizement through the rational control of nature via labor—unfettered from the twin tutelage of God and nature, the modern man celebrates

newfound freedom and power understood as individual autonomy. On the other hand, because man is a part of nature, the demotion of nature to “almost worthless materials,” or what Heidegger calls “standing reserve,” is simultaneously a demotion for man. Like the very nature that we master, the self becomes just another “mixed mode,” or a metaphysically unreal construction. For Locke, man wins his dignity by his distance from nature and capacity to transcend it, but also sacrifices that dignity because nature ceases to be a worthy object of subjection, and our share of it makes mastery a cheap consolation prize. The modern individual is radically free but also shockingly puny—the price of such freedom is an excruciating contingency and insignificance. Therefore, the path that runs to Nietzsche’s infamous death of God and the spiritual detumescence of the West begins with Locke’s murder of the real human person. What looks like transcendence is nothing other than the solipsistic confines of our own immanence, our lack of openness to eternity.

In his penetrating book, *Homeless and at Home in America*, Peter Lawler contends that this internecine conflict within modernity’s schizophrenic anthropology, the tension between our longing for transcendence and our inescapable immanence, expresses itself today in the two intellectual movements that have proven to be the most attractive and most pernicious to our more sophisticated citizens: Darwinism and libertarianism.¹ My primary aim in this article is to examine Lawler’s attempt to resolve the polarity between our Darwinian and libertarian accounts of human beings by virtue of a kind of “Thomistic Christian Realism”² that depends on the defense of a “science of theology.”³ This “science of theology,” influenced by Orestes Brownson and Pope Benedict XVI (among others), replaces an account of human nature based on the “abstract unity of reason” and mutual exclusivity of reason and revelation with the “real solidarity or ‘living unity’ of all human beings discov-

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ered through revelation"⁴; in other words, the impersonal, abstract individuality of classical philosophy that results from the tension between logos and eros is replaced by the personal, phenomenologically concrete human being that results from the interdependence of logos and eros. Lawler's treatment is inarguably influenced by Strauss's conception of the tension between reason and revelation but also moves beyond those philosophical parameters by making the tension between the impersonal God of classical philosophy and the personal God of early Christian thought the more fundamental conflict.

Our American intellectual proclivities turn out to be microcosmic of the disjunctive, modern soul—the split between Darwinism and libertarianism, understood as reflective of the split between our experience of being at home in nature versus the experience of utter alienation from it, mirrors the incoherence in the Lockean account of the individual. Lawler often depicts the libertarian view as a hypertrophic version of Locke's position that fails to "keep Lockean modes of thought limited or in a Locke box,"⁵ but both the libertarian and the Darwinian strains of thought are already contained within the Lockean anthropology; essentially, Darwinism is the amplification of the Lockean reduction of the individual to mechanistic nature at the expense of the capacity to distinguish himself from nature through transcendence. Likewise, Darwinism depends on an element of libertarian transcendence insofar as its account of human evolution requires seeing "ourselves as emergent exceptions to what is otherwise true about nature."⁶ Nevertheless, Lawler's explication of these contradictory but oddly interdependent intellectual impulses is a helpful prelude to understanding not only a more unified account of man, but also the way the American regime is uniquely constituted to reflect this unity.

According to Lawler, "[v]irtually all sophisticated Americans claim to believe that Darwin teaches the whole truth about who or what we are."⁷ As Lawler sees it, the "real controversy" surrounding Darwinism today is not the contest between science and biblical creationism, but rather the contest "between those who still believe that evolution can account for the whole of human behavior and those who see with their own eyes that it does not."⁸ Darwinism's truth is to be found in its emphasis on the support our natural instincts provide for the practice of virtue, the natural support for the different purposes that animate men and women, the natural attachment we have to our own families and by extension the natural justification for laws that protect private property, and most generally the guidance nature provides for us to "live happily and purposefully."⁹ However, the thoroughgoing reductionism that Darwinism promotes fails to adequately capture "human goods such as love, friendship, and virtue in terms of the survival and flourishing of the species."¹⁰ According to Darwinism, man is radically at home in nature because he is merely an accidental product of natural selection; nature makes him exist within nature. Therefore, Darwinian nature cannot possibly comprehend man's intestinal longing to transcend nature or "our manly longing for individual perfection"¹¹; following Harvey Mansfield's lead, Lawler notes that "[t]he

drama of the individual produced by manliness cannot become the drama of the species."¹² Robbed of the capacity for transcendent longing and the assertion of personal significance that follows, the distinction between man and beast becomes one of mere degree; the essential teaching of Darwinism is "I'm nothing but species fodder,"¹³ or more simply "I am nothing."¹⁴

In contradistinction to the Darwinian view of nature as perfectly hospitable for man, libertarianism interprets nature as little more than an opportunity for transcendence; the free or autonomous individual is only bound by the contracts he freely consents to. In fact, the ineluctable conclusion of libertarian logic is that "the free market's principles of contract and consent transform every feature of human life."¹⁵ This deification of individual choice undermines any argument for the natural strictures on human behavior that make our lives distinctively human; what was traditionally understood to be our insuperable natural limitations are now reinterpreted as merely contingent results of human decision. Lawler concedes this produces some salutary expansion of the "menu of choice" available to us, but "to some large extent this gain comes at the expense of undermining the conditions that would assist us in choosing well on behalf of the soul."¹⁶ The lionization of individual freedom robs freedom of any discernible object: the consistent libertarian holds that "virtue is for liberty, and that it's only good if it's useful in sustaining our political life and our private freedom."¹⁷ The rejection of any naturally defined human horizon potentially culminates in extreme forms of transhuman transformation; Lawler points out that today's "creeping libertarianism is starting to get pretty creepy."¹⁸

Despite the obvious inconsistencies between Darwinism and libertarianism, "our sophisticated Americans" are "almost always libertarian sociobiologists"¹⁹; somehow they manage to incoherently combine the fact of our special status via autonomy with the deprived status that comes with being just another animal species. The "laughable contradiction" between our insistence on the "freedom and dignity of the individual" and the view that "we have no enduring significance in the accidental evolutionary process" produces Americans' "official self-understanding as autonomous chimps."²⁰ However, there is a hidden connection between the two when they are properly understood—both of them presume a view of nature antipathetic to conservatism. Following the libertarian rejection of stable natural limitations, the Darwinian view of evolutionary progress necessarily results in the position that "[e]verything natural is merely transitional."²¹ In other words, if Darwinism cannot ultimately "explain why we shouldn't intervene in the evolutionary process if we can,"²² it becomes distressingly unclear what precisely is supposed to be conserved and why. Despite its explicit intentions, Darwinism, like libertarianism, ends up undermining "virtue based on the acceptance of intractable limitations of human nature and the human condition"²³; Lawler concludes finally that "Darwinian conservatism is an oxymoron."²⁴ Unfettered from any natural restraints, Darwinism and libertarianism fail to offer real opposition

to the gathering techno-relativism that threatens to undercut the opportunities for genuine human freedom and virtue.

Evangelicals repudiate Darwinism and libertarianism, seeing, however articulately, that the two are somehow “interdependent.”²⁵ Although neither is completely true, both offer valuable insights. Darwinism can counter the immoderate individualism of libertarianism with its emphasis on natural sociability, whereas libertarianism can temper the sociobiological reductionism of Darwinism by illuminating the significance of the free individual. According to Lawler, however, although “[e]vangelicals and orthodox believers come much closer to living the way nature intends in order for the species to flourish,” they join libertarians in using the language of “autonomy” to describe themselves and join the Darwinians in “believing there’s no support in nature at all for their purpose-driven lives.”²⁶ In fact, they generally insist that “if it weren’t for the absolute truth of the Bible something like aimless or relativistic naturalism would be true”²⁷; it is not merely that they choose not to provide rational support for the content of their faith in nonrevelatory language, but that they actually believe “reason has little to say” about what amounts to “human choice between two competing worldviews.”²⁸ From Lawler’s perspective, the “weakness of biblical conservatism”²⁹ is its reflexive reliance on biblical scripture versus a rational explication of what “anyone can see with their own eyes”; if the choice is framed as one “between Biblical fundamentalism and Lockean individualism,”³⁰ Locke will prove unbeatable.

According to Lawler, despite their salient differences, “[o]ur libertarians, our Darwinians, and our Evangelicals all agree there is no science of theology.”³¹ First and foremost, this science has to be distinguished from natural science, which both Socrates and the Bible agree “has nothing to say” about “how human beings should live with one another” or the “uniquely human free quest for perfection that culminates in some way or another in God.”³² In fact, today “we’ve abandoned the true goal of science,” which “is to give an account of the way all things—including human beings—are”; although “we don’t really deny that such a personal being exists,” we no longer believe we can reason about such a being’s “true situation” or truly know “the being who can know.”³³ As a consequence of the wholesale rejection of the possibility of a science of theology, “we all lack a way of talking reasonably about the real lives of particular persons”³⁴; even more radically, Lawler asserts that the very “possibility of the free and rational being open to the truth depends upon the corresponding possibility of a personal, rational science of theology.”³⁵ If the Enlightenment project to rationally control nature ultimately divests the individual of personal significance, or if “the modern paradox is that the individual must be vanquished for the individual *really* to prevail,”³⁶ then the science of theology restores our individual wholeness by functioning as “an egalitarian theology of irreplaceable personal significance.”³⁷

What precisely is this science of theology? In Lawler’s articulation, a “defense of the true science of theology” rests on the “reasonableness of belief in a personal God who is rational, creative, and erotic.”³⁸ This science is animated centrally by the “fundamental human choice”

between the “impersonal Logos or God of the classical philosophers and the personal Logos or God described by the early Christians”³⁹; at the same time it must provide a philosophical response to the “permanent human problem,” which is the “relationship between the particular human being and eternity.”⁴⁰ The connection between our personal individual significance and the possibility of a personal God is so strong Lawler suggests without Him “we are condemned to live without reliable evidence”⁴¹ of our significance; one is tempted to attribute to Lawler the radical view of Orestes Brownson that the “denial of God is finally as misanthropic as the denial of human nature.”⁴² Therefore, a rational resuscitation of our personal significance in light of the classical and modern depersonalization of the human individual requires reconnecting man to a personal God, thereby renewing his proper consciousness of eternity.

To fully understand Lawler’s account of the science of theology requires an appreciation of the philosophical debts he freely acknowledges but also meticulously reevaluates. In a chapter titled “Against the Lobotomites,” Lawler announces his intention to “keep alive the conflict between the natural theology of the philosophers and the personal theology of the Bible.”⁴³ Although he accepts Pangle’s classification of himself as a “theologically inspired Straussian”⁴⁴ and what James W. Ceaser apparently calls “faith-based Straussianism,” the conflict between natural and personal theology is not obviously identical to the conflict between reason and revelation as Strauss formulated it; at the very least, Lawler indicates that he departs from classical rationalism’s approach to the problem, which Strauss is generally understood to have favored. In fact, Lawler elsewhere indicates that this new conflict is meant as a substitution for the characteristically Straussian formulation: “[T]he fundamental human choice is not so much between reason and revelation.”⁴⁵ At least initially, what distinguishes Lawler’s view of the fundamental tension from Strauss’s view (or at least Pangle’s) is that both candidate options are considered “reasonable choices”⁴⁶ versus the mutual exclusivity of reason and revelation; indeed, Lawler often invokes the “distinctive reasonableness of Christian faith.”⁴⁷ At one point, he depicts the two possibilities as “two fundamental ways of explaining why human beings should be at home with their homelessness” and as “two explanations of how human beings destabilize what might otherwise be regarded as a perfect natural order.”⁴⁸ In this vein he finds more common ground with John Courtney Murray than Brownson with respect to Lawler’s contention that the “evidence of our own eyes might point in more than one direction” and this rationally irresolvable choice requires a kind of brute “metaphysical decision.”⁴⁹ In this regard, Lawler’s tension between natural and personal theology seems to mirror the Straussian tension between reason and revelation: their recalcitrance to decisive philosophical settlement necessitates that a person simply choose.

However, Lawler criticizes the dichotomous character of the Straussian tension insofar as it simply does not conform to our lived experience: “Not many creatures, it seems to me, have experienced the alternatives between blind obedience and rational independence as starkly as Pangle presents it.”⁵⁰

In other words, Lawler presents the choice between the life of philosophy and the life of faith as analogous to the choice between “lobotomy and serenity” or between the neglect of the very problem versus a life of uninterrupted contemplation.⁵¹ For Lawler, the theologically inspired Straussian is “constantly animated by concerns” that “arise among beings who are . . . incurably God directed.”⁵² Although he agrees with Pangle’s portrayal of the fundamental problem, Pangle’s desire to defend rational independence is presented as less “open-minded”⁵³; again, Pangle ostensibly assumes our longing for God is inconsistent with rational independence. Lawler criticizes Pangle’s conception of rational independence as a caricature; he repeatedly follows Tocqueville’s insight that “intellectual openness” is dependent on some “dogmatic deference to moral and intellectual authority”⁵⁴ and that such dogma is necessary to “resist the reign of fashion and popularized science.”⁵⁵

Likewise, Lawler criticizes Allan Bloom’s depiction of the “liberated Socratic philosopher” as one of his “exaggerations” or “distortions.”⁵⁶ According to Pangle, human eros ultimately points beyond the cumbersome bonds of “marital and familial lives” and the cave-like darkness of political life to the philosophic life understood as culminating in “divine rational self-sufficiency” and a “kind of trans-erotic solitude.”⁵⁷ In Pangle’s version, the “point of philosophy is to negate the credibility of the premises of all genuinely moral and religious life”⁵⁸; the ultimate independence of the Socratic philosopher is achieved when he “liberates his mind” from all “moral, religious, and political illusions.”⁵⁹ Both Pangle and Bloom (and possibly Strauss) present the philosopher as one who experiences eternity because he knows his own radical contingency—he “experiences his mortality all the way down.”⁶⁰ In other words, the “philosopher manages to both assert radically and deny radically the cosmic significance of his own existence.”⁶¹ The philosopher knows he is cosmically insignificant because he is contingent, but is cosmically significant because he is the only person aware of his contingency. In Bloom’s view, “the authentic experience of the philosopher is somehow a combination of the deepest self-knowledge and the deepest self-forgetting”⁶²; in the final analysis, the “Socratic drama of the pursuit of wisdom is about the particular being losing himself in the apprehension of anonymous or impersonal truth.”⁶³

Bloom’s conception of philosophy “becomes increasingly impersonal”⁶⁴ and denies significance not only to the philosopher but “what people most love—their children, and their country”⁶⁵; such a life is “childishly disconnected from the animating personal experience of moral responsibility.”⁶⁶ Of course, Lawler contends that the “perfect philosopher,” “fascinating and repulsive,” is not real and “there is no evidence that there really is such a being.”⁶⁷ Lawler corrects the depersonalized anthropology of the classical and modern philosophy by first pointing out the contradiction between “personal freedom” and the “impersonal causation” in a “necessitarian” cosmos; the “being who can understand Being” or who “can’t be accounted for in any mathematical or necessitarian physics” does “seem to be a chance occurrence in a cosmos that has no need for and is seemingly distorted by his existence.”⁶⁸ A perfectly depersonalized cos-

mos, one in which God “has no relationship to the temporal” and to whom “time-bound beings mean nothing,” simply “can’t account for the existence of real persons, of beings open to the truth and defined in this world by time.”⁶⁹ In this regard, Lawler accepts the Heideggerian view that temporality is a defining characteristic of the human being but follows Strauss’s criticism of Heidegger that charges him with the “explicit renunciation of eternity”—theoretically leading to the “estrangement from man’s deepest desires and therewith from the primary issues.”⁷⁰

According to Lawler, a fuller account of our erotic longing would reveal that it “points in the direction of a personal God” and that thinking about the erotic character of our particular personhood naturally implies an understanding of God as a “who” as opposed to a “what.”⁷¹ The God of classical monotheism is an impersonal God understood as a “wholly self-sufficient or unerotic or unmovable being”; he is not a “relational” God who “cares or even knows about the existence of particular human beings.”⁷² There is a sense in which the unerotic, self-sufficient philosopher could be understood as created in his image—the height of Pangle’s life of rational independence is an approximation of the faceless, loveless divine: “Insofar as human beings are moved by his existence it is in pursuit of self-sufficient freedom from whom they really are.”⁷³ However, Lawler indicates his departure from the depersonalized philosopher has everything to do with his different conception of God; he entertains the possibility that his fundamental disagreement with Pangle regards “what sort of God is the image of perfection beyond all human experience to which the deepest human longings point.”⁷⁴ The question “Who or what is God?” is “inseparable” from the question “Who or what am I?”⁷⁵ Lawler’s anthropology is therefore inextricably bound with his theology: “The personalities of God and man can’t be wholly or irredeemably unrelated.”⁷⁶

The truth about human nature is that we are caught somewhere between beast and God—the “perfectly trans-erotic or solitary philosopher” and the “perfectly isolated individual” are fictions.⁷⁷ It is impossible to even feign personal insignificance: “[W]e can’t help but both want to be, and to be important.”⁷⁸ In fact, the perception of our significance is so inexorably woven into the fabric of our being that the “real human being, asserts he is more than, essentially or qualitatively different from, his slavish fears, obsessions, and bodily desires”⁷⁹; one of the most revealing tendencies is our penchant for “manly exaggeration.”⁸⁰ The same “language and the capacities” that allow and drive us to “assert indispensable individual importance”⁸¹ serve as the requisite condition for a reflection on the ultimate source: We are “hardwired, so to speak, as beings with minds to think about who or what God must be.”⁸² As “particular persons” or “irreducibly and ineradicably erotic ‘whos,’” we are “incurably God-directed”⁸³; furthermore, our own “insistence on being a ‘who’ and not merely a ‘what’ calls to mind the personal Creator in Whose image we are made.”⁸⁴

Lawler often presents his science of theology as a kind of “Thomistic Christian Realism”⁸⁵ insofar as it reflects an account of man that is true to his peculiar admixture of eros and logos, an account of a “rational, creative, and erotic

God”⁸⁶ that is the ineluctable object of our own rational, creative, and erotic longings, and ultimately an account of the “ground of Being” as a “transformed understanding of the Logos.”⁸⁷ However, it is not always clear what precisely the status is of either the Christian or Thomistic component in this formulation. Although Lawler repeatedly affirms the reasonableness of faith in general and the “distinctive” reasonableness of Christian faith in particular, he also admits that “making the case against Darwin and on behalf of human dignity need not depend on revelation or the distinctive insights of Christian psychology,”⁸⁸ that “evangelical psychology” could be illuminating for “even those who don’t believe in Biblical revelation,”⁸⁹ and that we are “incurably directed toward a personal God whether or not there is such a God.”⁹⁰ Lawler never attempts to provide anything like an apodictic demonstration of God’s existence—in fact, he consistently makes the argument that certain kinds of evidence “point in the direction” of a personal God rather than render His reality empirically or logically verifiable. The most forceful position he ever articulates is a kind of hypothetical biconditional: If people want to believe in their personal significance, then they must believe in God or “be condemned to live without any reliable evidence that they are [significant].”⁹¹ Still, given that Lawler consistently points out that our belief in our personal significance is existentially inexorable, and even further that the actual fact of our personal significance is ineradicable, it would appear the “argument for a personal God Who sees us as we truly are is everywhere.”⁹²

Moreover, an ambiguity in the Thomistic character of Lawler’s realism raises questions regarding how he finally articulates the tension between reason and revelation. Lawler often argues, following John Courtney Murray, that what our country “especially needs” are specifically “Catholic reflections on the truth about human nature,”⁹³ that our current “crises in self-understanding can only be overcome through natural law’s revival,”⁹⁴ and that the “realism of Thomistic natural law may turn out to be postmodernism properly understood.”⁹⁵ Lawler explicitly encourages religious conservatives to “reinvigorate the more comprehensive understanding of human nature found in the great tradition of natural law” and implies this tradition contains an “account of the whole truth about human beings that we can see with our own eyes.”⁹⁶ However, Lawler also seems to follow Wilson Carey McWilliams’s appeal to classical and Christian sources “without succumbing to the charm of some authoritative synthesis that tempts the Thomist.”⁹⁷ In fact, Lawler announces his intention to “keep alive the conflict” between natural and personal theology,⁹⁸ contends that these two “alternatives in speech” are a source of “indispensable insight into the ineradicable tensions and contradictions that characterize especially the best human beings or at least almost all the best human beings,”⁹⁹ and that “we students of political philosophy really live the tension” that exists between reason and revelation.¹⁰⁰ Lawler’s “faith based Straussianism” often appears to be a volatile amalgam of ideas precisely because he insists on revivifying the tension and also moderating it through the lens of his version of Thomistic realism; to the contrary, Strauss’s

invocation of the conflict famously entails a kind of pointed neglect of the possibility of a Christian resolution.

Lawler goes as far as to recommend to Straussians that they “consider not only the utility but the truth of the Thomistic proposition concerning the compatibility of what we know through reason and what we know through revelation.”¹⁰¹ However, it is important to note he never attempts to fully sketch out what this Thomism amounts to in very exacting or scholarly terms; Lawler’s Thomism can be pithily distilled as “the realistic view that the human mind is fitted to know the truth about human purposes and that what we know through revelation completes—not contradicts—what we know through reason.”¹⁰² Pangle seriously and insightfully endeavors to restore the “genuinely intellectual dimension of the conflict between reason and revelation” but reduces the intellectual or the rational to that which is by definition independent of revelation¹⁰³; by way of contrast, Lawler argues “[r]eason or science cannot demonstrate the existence of the Creator, but the denial of the possibility is scientism or dogmatic atheism.”¹⁰⁴ Also, although the ultimate truth about God “eludes us”—making necessary a “faith that our experience of his knowledge and love of us is not an illusion”¹⁰⁵—we can “know,” following St. Augustine, that “our deepest longings point in the direction of his personal knowledge and love of us.”¹⁰⁶ When discussing the character of *Hulga* in Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People,” Lawler argues there is “no reason to believe” that a serious “dialogue” with Thomism would “point her away from philosophy.”¹⁰⁷ In fact, when he explains his Thomistic realism elsewhere he almost interchangeably refers to it as a Socratic realism: “For the Socratic realist there is authentic joy in discovering what is real”¹⁰⁸ and there is a genuine “compatibility between the results of Socratic introspection and what is taught about human psychology by the great Christian thinkers.”¹⁰⁹ According to Lawler, not only is it “not true that the orthodox Jewish and Catholic traditions really are full of the thought that God demands the radical sacrifice of the intellect,” but rather it is more accurate to contend God “demands that I tell the truth to myself about myself as a particular being who can’t be reduced to either body or mind.”¹¹⁰ Still, the recognition of compatibility versus mutual exclusivity does not adequately capture the relation between reason and revelation as delineated in Lawler’s Thomistic realism; from the perspective of our irreducible personal significance, or our “manliness,” “religion is more fundamental than philosophy” because it recognizes that the “question of individual or personal identity” is more basic than the “truth about all things from an impersonal or completely detached perspective.”¹¹¹ In short, it recognizes that “Logos must be personal”¹¹² and “divine truth can’t be separated from personal morality.”¹¹³

The realism of Thomism derives from the fact that it seems to “conform better” than Pangle’s or Strauss’s account to “how we actually experience our souls and our lives”¹¹⁴; in other words, Lawler’s version of Thomism rests on a more empirically grounded anthropology that can see that our “dignity comes through living well in the light of what we can’t help but know about our dependence

on nature, God, and each other."¹¹⁵ In contradiction to the liberal view that "humans are born free," Lawler adopts McWilliams's view that "[w]e're born dependant and in many important ways remain that way."¹¹⁶ Whereas the Christian view understands humans as "whole rational and erotic beings,"¹¹⁷ it also recognizes "that the human powers of knowing and loving are limited"¹¹⁸; for a "being to be completely serene and completely unerotic is not a possibility . . . for a being with a body."¹¹⁹ The ineluctable fact of our dependence or what humans know about themselves as "relational being[s]" generates a foundation for moral life: "The standard of moral judgment is what we can't help but know about our personhood or creatureliness, about the responsibilities that flow from personal awareness of loving dependence."¹²⁰ In place of the Socratic formulation that the "unexamined life is not worth living for man," based as it is on Socrates' own "ultimately solitary and quite questionable personal experience,"¹²¹ Lawler substitutes the view that "one's capacity for transcendence and one's mortality" are the essential "preconditions for everything that makes human life worth living."¹²²

Lawler's Thomistic realism turns out to be a correction of Strauss's view that the mutual exclusivity of reason and revelation requires a kind of willful decision. Strauss's interpretation of the tension is paradoxical because the compartmentalization of revelation from reason was intended to secure revelation against the dogmatic atheism of the Enlightenment, but it does so at the price of revelation's reasonableness; in other words, Strauss cannot recommend revelation as a rational choice but rather can only protect it from a precipitous dismissal by reason. Problematically, this actually concedes the very legitimacy of the truncated modern account of reason that Strauss sets out to reject. One could argue that what for Strauss is the vital driving force behind the unfolding of the West—the austere tension between reason and revelation—is really a peculiarly modern instantiation of that historical conflict. Lawler's aim in correcting the Straussian error at first seems modest: His intent is less to demonstrate the rational persuasiveness of the belief in a personal God than to suggest it is a rationally tenable choice, however persuasive. He replaces a Straussian decisionism with a genuine dialogue between the two competing sides. In this sense, Lawler unshackles the Straussian tension from the tendentious modern premises Strauss too hastily—if unknowingly—permitted. However, Lawler can be much more ambitious than even this because he not only reinvigorates the tension but also makes the psychological and erotic argument for personal theology, even if unsupported by actual revelation, the stronger of the two. Moreover, he argues that the science of theology is the most rationally attractive of all the available options, even despite its recalcitrance to decisive demonstration. Attempting to navigate between the mutual exclusivity, Lawler often presents the tension between personal and natural theology as potentially resolvable and therefore less than an enduring philosophical conflict: Insofar as "*Logos must be personal*" (italics added) and the modern options are the sum result of "thinking unrealistically or abstractly about who we and God really are," the really impressive evidence is marshaled

in favor of personal theology understood as the conclusion of the science of theology.¹²³

The need for this particular brand of realism is evidenced by the fact that the "distance between our personal experiences and what we think we know through science has never been wider"¹²⁴; Lawler argues Americans in particular are "so unscientific that we don't even really try to account for what we can see with our own eyes."¹²⁵ Lawler consistently makes appeals to evidence we can all "see with our own eyes"; Americans can especially benefit from this approach because we "have always read more than seen for ourselves what we think we know about moral and political life."¹²⁶ Of course, we can also suffer from focusing too narrowly on this kind of empirical account: For example, "Religion counters what we see with our own eyes about nature's indifference with the 'drama,' the greatness and misery, of each of our particular existences."¹²⁷ Americans need "more science not less,"¹²⁸ provided that science acknowledges its own limitations by grasping the "mystery of freedom"¹²⁹: It is not reason but revelation that "provides the most plausible explanation for the mystery of the elusiveness of one's own soul."¹³⁰ Lawler argues that even on Lockean grounds one would have to concede that it "makes sense to speak of a Creator" and of our "mysterious liberty" because it "allows human individuals alone to improve upon or move away from what they've been given by nature."¹³¹

In an essay titled "Conservative Postmodernism, Postmodern Conservatism," Lawler observes that the defining characteristic of modernity is "a particular definition of what a human being is."¹³² This singularly modern contention—that "a human being is an individual"—fails to describe a "real or complete human being" and instead offers an "abstraction, an invention of the human mind."¹³³ Today, one can see discern the problematic character of modern individuality writ large in American consciousness—Americans find themselves pulled between the modern inclination toward de-Hellenization, or the systematic impulse to rescue the "willful God and the willful human person" from the "impersonal metaphysical system" that constitutes classical science and de-Christianization, the countervailing impulse to "free science from all anthropomorphic or personal distortion" rendering all legitimate science perfectly impersonal.¹³⁴ The two modern philosophical movements correspond roughly to libertarianism and Darwinism, and they reflect instructively the incoherent predilections that radiate from the unstable, modern bifurcation of the human person into the perfectly natural and the perfectly transnatural. Lawler's Thomism aims at repudiating the self-sufficiency or pretensions of comprehensiveness of each while acknowledging the partial truth of both; from the perspective of natural law, "there's reason and error on both sides."¹³⁵ Lawler sums it up concisely: "Darwin is right on natural sociability and Locke on our distinctive freedom."¹³⁶ One could argue that they reflect divergent dispositions at the crux of modern self-consciousness: We exhibit the "most insane form of pride ever" by aiming to replace God by mastering nature and creating our own secular paradise, but also a kind of desperate diffidence in simultaneously cutting ourselves off

from the sources of our dignity, identifying ourselves with an impersonal nature that can only be indifferent to our insignificant lives.¹³⁷ Instead, Lawler recommends the genuine combination of pride and humility espoused by Thomistic natural law which is premised on our inability “to make ourselves more or less human”; because we are made in the image of God, neither the extreme of self-deification nor complete technological dehumanization is possible.¹³⁸ Under the influence of McWilliams, Lawler’s Thomistic realism places the “dialectic between pride and humility” at “the heart of the West’s vitality” because it “reveals the truth about our natures”: “[W]e’re more than other animals, but animals still.”¹³⁹

Lawler’s Thomism can be understood as a correction to modern Augustinianism: The modern individual is “an Augustinian who does not believe in the personal and providential God of the Bible.”¹⁴⁰ Our Augustinianism consists in the exorbitant emphasis we are inclined to place on the “human experience of homelessness and alienation”—modern man sees himself as an “absolutely contingent being who belong[s] nowhere in particular” and therefore is bereft of gratitude for nature.¹⁴¹ The Darwinian and Lockean views of man are in a sense Augustinian because both result in a radical disjunction between man and nature: We end up transcending a valueless nature in flux either evolutionarily or willfully. Paradoxically, the liberation from nature and the depersonalization of the modern individual have the effect of personalizing “what we can actually know about nature”¹⁴²; because we can “only know what we have made in our own image,” the purpose of modern science is to “will personal reality into being.”¹⁴³ In other words, the “sundering of the person from Logos,”¹⁴⁴ or the transformation of every “who” question into a degraded “what” question, replaces the intestinal need of the human individual to affirm his personal significance in light of his relation to God with the obsessive quest to “impose his desire for personal significance on nature.”¹⁴⁵ Because we are a part of nature we are also, oddly enough, the object of this imposition—instead of intuiting our genuine significance as a consequence of unmediated self-introspection, we project a wildly contrived version completely disconnected from lived experience. Of course, this would be another way Lawler distinguishes himself from Strauss: Rather than marking a watershed break from classical thought, the impersonal logos of modernity is a consummation of the Socratic turn from the primacy of the “who” to the centrality of the “what”—there is a genealogical line that clearly runs from ancient philosophy to modern technology. Moreover, to diagnose the problem of modernity as a kind of Augustinianism is also to reveal the extent to which Christianity itself is complicit in this transformation: To impel a departure from the pagan lionization of nature and reveal natural philosophy as a species of prideful sin, a Christian demythologization of nature was necessary that might have eventually contributed to its more radical devaluation during the Enlightenment.¹⁴⁶ Also, the powerful emphasis in Christianity on the unique moral significance of every person might have also prepared for the modern preoccupation with individuality as such.

Although it may be the case, according to Lawler, that we live in “unstable, disorienting, narcissistic, degrading, and impersonal times,”¹⁴⁷ Americans still draw from a “Thomistic tradition deeper and older than our own”¹⁴⁸ and have recourse to a “founding theology” that keeps us “distinctively able to display the fact that we do have souls.”¹⁴⁹ America, in fact, “despite the shallowness of its historical roots, its impoverished culture, and the restless vagueness of its secular utopianism . . . still remains capable of showing how human beings can be at home in the world, as well as how they can be at home with their homelessness.”¹⁵⁰ For Lawler, our openness to spiritual responses to modernity makes American life a uniquely helpful prism for interpreting human nature—the universality of the “greatness and misery of our way of life”¹⁵¹ finds support in “our singular ability to be a home for the politically homeless everywhere.”¹⁵² Americans need to be and are capable of being receptive to a science of theology that reaffirms the real person as a composite of logos and eros, who is grateful for his immanent nature because it functions as a precondition for transcendence and a source of “spiritual knowledge” regarding its insuperable limitations. Lawler’s impressive *Homeless and at Home in America* is not a therapeutic lullaby, nor is it an indictment—he attempts neither to untether nor to extirpate our erotic longings, as fundamental to our being as they are. Finally, one can interpret Lawler’s Thomistic realism as a philosophical defense of a kind of Biblical moderation: we must learn to experience a pride that resists the modern gravitational pull toward self-deification and a humility that does not degenerate into self-abnegation. Lawler’s most ambitious hope is that a science of theology can get “Americans really arguing again, of holding again the truth that they are capable of engaging in the dialogue about the human good that is the foundation of any civil and civilized moral and political life.”¹⁵³

NOTES

1. Peter Lawler, *Homeless and at Home in America: Evidence for the Dignity of the Human Soul in our Time and Place* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007), 10.

2. *Ibid.*, 225.

3. Lawler’s most comprehensive treatment of this can be found in his “American Nominalism and Our Need for the Science of Theology,” in *First Principles*, the ISI Web Journal, <http://www.firstprinciplesjournal.com/articles.aspx?article=523&loc=qs> (accessed March 28, 2008).

4. Orestes Brownson, *The American Republic*, ed. Peter Lawler, xxxvii (New York: ISI, 2003). Here Lawler provides a lucid account of Brownson’s view that “all philosophy uninfluenced by Christianity” provides a “dead or abstract” treatment of human unity.

5. Lawler, *Homeless*, 27.

6. *Ibid.*, 61.

7. Lawler, “Nominalism,” 1.

8. Lawler, *Homeless*, 78.

9. *Ibid.*, 58.

10. *Ibid.*, 60.

11. *Ibid.*, 60.

12. *Ibid.*, 85.

13. Lawler, “Nominalism,” 2.

14. Lawler, *Homeless*, 85. Emphasis in the original.

15. *Ibid.*, 122.

16. *Ibid.*, 139.

17. *Ibid.*, 21.

18. *Ibid.*, 23.

19. *Ibid.*, 60.

20. Lawler, “Nominalism,” 2.

21. Lawler, *Homeless*, 61.

22. Ibid., 88.
 23. Ibid., 61.
 24. Ibid., 88.
 25. Ibid., 61.
 26. Lawler, "Nominalism," 2.
 27. Ibid.
 28. Ibid.
 29. Lawler, *Homeless*, 64.
 30. Ibid., 106.
 31. Lawler, "Nominalism," 2.
 32. Lawler, *Homeless*, 32.
 33. Lawler, "Nominalism," 1.
 34. Ibid., 3.
 35. Ibid., 3.
 36. Lawler, *Homeless*, 82. Emphasis in the original.
 37. Ibid., 5.
 38. Lawler, "Nominalism," 1.
 39. Ibid., 1; Lawler, *Homeless*, 26.
 40. Lawler, *Homeless*, 26.
 41. Ibid., 35.
 42. Brownson, *The American Republic*, xxxi.
 43. Lawler, *Homeless*, 26.
 44. Ibid.
 45. Lawler, "Nominalism," 1.
 46. Ibid., 1.
 47. Ibid., 4.
 48. Lawler, *Homeless*, 32.
 49. Ibid., 104.
 50. Ibid., 35.
 51. Ibid., 39.
 52. Ibid., 27.
 53. Ibid., 26.
 54. Ibid., 127.
 55. Ibid., 22.
 56. Ibid., 38.
 57. Ibid., 30.
 58. Ibid., 28.
 59. Ibid., 33.
 60. Ibid., 33.
 61. Ibid., 42.
 62. Ibid., 41.
 63. Lawler, "Nominalism," 3. Lawler reiterates a version of this formulation in *Homeless*, 30.
 64. Lawler, *Homeless*, 43.
 65. Ibid., 41.
 66. Ibid., 46.
 67. Ibid.
 68. Lawler, "Nominalism," 4.
 69. Ibid. For a parallel discussion of the historical and philosophical consequences of a comprehensively impersonal cosmology see Remi Brague's *The Wisdom of the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
 70. Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 55.
 71. Lawler, *Homeless*, 31.
 72. Lawler, "Nominalism," 3.
 73. Ibid., 4.
 74. Lawler, *Homeless*, 29.
 75. Ibid., 27.
 76. Lawler, "Nominalism," 3.
 77. Lawler, *Homeless*, 41.
 78. Ibid., 89.
 79. Ibid., 78.
 80. Ibid., 82.
 81. Ibid., 80.
 82. Lawler, "Nominalism," 3.
 83. Lawler, *Homeless*, 27.
 84. Ibid., 4–5.
 85. Ibid., 225.
 86. Lawler, "Nominalism," 1.
 87. Ibid., 4.
 88. Lawler, *Homeless*, 62.
 89. Ibid., 62.
 90. Ibid., 31.
 91. Ibid., 35.
 92. Ibid., 46.
 93. Ibid., 98.
 94. Ibid., 91.
 95. Ibid., 96.
 96. Ibid., 65.
 97. Ibid., 69.
 98. Ibid., 26.
 99. Ibid., 29.
 100. Ibid.
 101. Ibid., 28.
 102. Ibid., 91.
 103. Ibid., 28.
 104. Peter Lawler, *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought* (Latham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 186.
 105. Lawler, *Homeless*, 31.
 106. Ibid.
 107. Ibid., 225.
 108. Lawler, *Postmodernism*, 187.
 109. Ibid., 186.
 110. Lawler, *Homeless*, 35.
 111. Ibid., 81.
 112. Lawler, "Nominalism," 10.
 113. Ibid., 4.
 114. Lawler, *Homeless*, 28.
 115. Ibid., 70.
 116. Ibid., 67.
 117. Lawler, "Nominalism," 4.
 118. Lawler, *Homeless*, 142.
 119. Ibid., 33.
 120. Lawler, "Nominalism," 4–5.
 121. Lawler, *Homeless*, 44.
 122. Ibid., 67.
 123. Lawler, "Nominalism," 10.
 124. Ibid., 1.
 125. Ibid., 2.
 126. Lawler, *Homeless*, 76.
 127. Ibid., 81.
 128. Lawler, "Nominalism," 10.
 129. Ibid., 5.
 130. Lawler, *Postmodernism*, 186.
 131. Lawler, *Homeless*, 35.
 132. Peter Lawler, "Conservative Postmodernism, Postmodern Conservatism," *Intercollegiate Review* (Fall 2002): 55.
 133. Ibid.
 134. Lawler, "Nominalism," 1.
 135. Lawler, *Homeless*, 106.
 136. Ibid., 106.
 137. Lawler, "Conservative Postmodernism," 58.
 138. Lawler, *Homeless*, 62.
 139. Ibid., 69.
 140. Lawler, "Conservative Postmodernism," 58.
 141. Ibid., 57.
 142. Lawler, "Nominalism," 6.
 143. Ibid.
 144. Ibid., 10.
 145. Ibid., 6.
 146. For a brilliant discussion of this see Remi Brague's *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), 186–87.
 147. Lawler, "Nominalism," 10.
 148. Lawler, *Homeless*, 2.
 149. Ibid., 16.
 150. Ibid., 2.
 151. Ibid., 1.
 152. Ibid.
 153. Ibid., 107.