

A RESPONSE

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I appreciate the care and attention with which the participants in this symposium have reflected on my book and issues to which it can be related, and I am grateful for the opportunity to try to clarify my understanding of the important questions they raise in their contributions.

Kenneth Grasso's primary substantive criticism of my book is that it does not develop sufficiently what John Paul II considered to be the positive aspects of liberal modernity, specifically what Grasso calls the "modern quest for freedom." I suspect that our differences, however interesting and important, do not amount to a disagreement on any fundamental points. In my book, I develop what I think is John Paul II's critique of liberal modernity in relation to "the culture of death." That is, I contend that the philosophic tradition of liberal modernity, even in its more moderate and apparently humane versions, sows the seeds of the contemporary culture of death that the pope so famously diagnosed. In the end, however, I admit that John Paul II found in liberal modernity certain legitimate and even noble aspirations. Grasso lays more emphasis on these positive aspects, but he also lays considerable emphasis on the same problems that I identify.

What seems to be at work, at least at first blush, is a difference in emphasis. Grasso accentuates the positive in liberal modernity. I, in contrast, do not accentuate, but at least admit (though perhaps too grudgingly and belatedly for Grasso's taste) what is positive in liberal modernity. To some extent this difference might arise from a difference in character. Perhaps I am something of a contrarian. More seriously, it might emerge from different understandings of the requirements of our present situation. Grasso and I agree that liberal modernity has fallen into some serious moral errors. It also seems to me, however, that liberal modernity is very self-satisfied, that its defects tend to be obscure to it. This is true even in the case of many people who are critical of liberal modernity's present defects. They recognize them, but they often present them as arising from recent and superficial departures from the right road—as if a growing approval of abortion and euthanasia could be traced to philosophical mistakes associated with the cultural and moral revolution of the 1960s. I think the errors are much more deeply rooted than that, and it seems to me that John Paul II thought so as well. Indeed, I first conceived the idea for the book under discussion when I noticed

that the system of thought the pope identified as a “culture of death”—with its utilitarian morality and hedonistic account of the good—was troublingly similar to the account of human nature and politics given by the early modern philosophic architects of liberal modernity, especially Hobbes. Given liberal modernity’s almost unshakable confidence in its own goodness, and the apparently deep sources of its present disorders, it seemed to me that the most helpful thing would be an emphasis on liberal modernity’s failings and their more than superficial origins. Simply put, civilizations, like individuals, are generally more aware of their virtues than their vices, so I thought it would be more helpful to call the latter to mind more forcefully.

Pursuing this line of thought a little further, it may be *not* that Grasso and I view the requirements of the present situation differently, but that we in fact have our eyes on different situations. Grasso is, I believe, much more steeped in Catholic thought than I am. Within the horizon of Catholic thought, there has been, until relatively recently, deep suspicion of liberal modernity. With a view to the tradition of specifically Catholic political thought, then, Grasso may be performing a similar service to the one I was seeking to perform for liberal modernity: pointing out the true but less than obvious, and less than welcome, thing—in his case, that liberal modernity is not as bad as many Catholic thinkers have believed. In contrast, in writing my book I thought of myself as addressing an audience largely committed to liberal modernity and thus most in need of hearing what can be said against it. On this view, it may be that both Professor Grasso and I are contrarians, but are being contrary in relation to different audiences—and, I should add, both of us with sound pedagogical reasons.

To sum up, to a large extent the differences between Grasso and me are differences, so to speak, in the *rhetoric* of our scholarship. But is there a *substantive* difference? If we could abandon all such rhetorical considerations as what audience is most in need of hearing what truths, if we could simply look at liberal modernity with a perfect philosophic detachment, would we disagree on anything? I am still not sure, and my uncertainty stems from an uncertainty about the fundamental character of liberal modernity, and an uncertainty about whether we can finally get to the bottom of the fundamental character of liberal modernity. I am inclined to say that liberal modernity has some salutary ideas—like the idea of individual rights—but that those ideas are erroneously grounded in the philosophy of liberal modernity. Grasso does not deny this. He, however, is more inclined to emphasize that liberal modernity for the first time brings to light and lays proper emphasis on such ideas as the rights and dignity of the person. But I do not deny that. I might be

inclined to say that, in its emphasis on and account of the dignity of the individual, liberal modernity is parasitic on insights of Christian revelation, which it then weakens by separating them from their theological context. On the other hand, Grasso might say that to some extent liberal modernity is to be viewed as an outgrowth of Christian revelation, to the extent that it develops such ideas as the dignity and rights of the individual.

These different formulations are perhaps all defensible. And it may be that this common defensibility, and the consequent difficulty of figuring out which formulation is most accurate, arises from the complex and ambiguous nature of liberal modernity itself, understood either as a philosophic movement or a political movement. Liberal modernity arose in a Christian culture, and therefore was certainly influenced by ideas and moral desires that come from Christianity. At the same time, its most sophisticated philosophic proponents seem to have thought of themselves as to some extent in rebellion against Christianity—or at least against traditional Christianity as they had received it. This is how it looks to me, and I think this is how it looked to John Paul II, who both admitted that the Enlightenment gave rise to great goods compatible with Christian revelation, and also held that the Enlightenment was “opposed to what Europe had become as a result of evangelization.”¹ This ambiguity inherent in the thing itself is the source of the ambiguity of John Paul II’s account of it, and of the ambiguity of the differences between Grasso and me.

J. Budziszewski’s argument can be understood as an excellent defense of the possibility and necessity of John Paul II’s project, against contemporary claims that the pope’s project ought not even have been attempted. John Paul II intended the teaching of *Evangelium Vitae*, and his papal teaching in general, to improve the quality of our public discourse and our public life. That is why he ordinarily addressed that teaching not only to Catholics but also to “all people of good will.” He evidently believed that his “gospel of life,” which is inseparable from the Gospel itself, was essential not only to the salvation of souls, but also to our proper understanding of ourselves, and hence our proper living together, in this present world. For him, the full truth about man must be known for our public discourse and our public life to be healthy, and the full truth about man is to be found most perfectly in the Christian revelation.

As Budziszewski notes, however, there are those who reject the pope’s project—not only in the sense that they disagree with his conclusions, but also in the sense that they disagree with the undertaking from the beginning. Many do not think it appropriate for our public

discourse to be conducted on the basis of claims to possess the “full truth about man.” For John Rawls and his followers, no “comprehensive doctrines”—whether they are based on reason or revelation—need apply for admission to public discussion.

Budziszewski contends that such a position turns out to be self-contradictory and self-destructive. It prohibits appeals to the Truth—understood as a truth rooted in the order of being and therefore independent of human beings—but at the same time it implicitly asserts a fundamental knowledge, insofar as it holds that any comprehensive doctrines cannot be known to be true and cannot be helpful. It aims to secure democracy by preemptively declaring out of order any person’s claim to possess a truth to which others must bow, but in the end it undermines democracy, because, in the absence of the possibility of a truth that is true for all, reason in particular and communication in general cannot be anything other than manipulation. This kind of liberalism claims for itself a kind of epistemic humility, but that humility presupposes a very bold claim to know what kind of things can be known. It aims to secure tolerance, but it thinks tolerance is only safe so long as no one is saying anything that challenges its basic assumptions. This liberalism is hostile to traditional religion because of the dangers arising from its supposed irrationality, but this liberalism itself begins to resemble an irrational and dangerous religion: unquestioningly asserting the dangers of certitude, fanatically denouncing fanaticism. By laying bare these difficulties with the secular doctrine of public reason, Budziszewski’s argument frees us from a set of prejudices that would prevent us from even listening to what John Paul II has to say.

Budziszewski does not leave it at this critique of a Rawlsian secular public reason, however. That he goes further is helpful, because there is another version of public reason that would also pose an impediment to our even listening to John Paul II’s critique of the contemporary culture of death. Budziszewski points out that there are those who claim that appeals to comprehensive doctrines are permissible in public discourse, so long as those appeals are limited to what can be known by reason alone, without any appeal to a particular tradition of faith. Thus we can, on this view, properly make appeal to God the creator and to the natural law, but not to a God who reveals himself in history and who offered a revealed divine law. We limit ourselves to what can be known to reason alone, because public discourse should be carried on in a manner that is intelligible to all human beings as human beings.

This view, too, would exclude John Paul II’s “gospel of life” from our public discourse, since it contends that the truth about man cannot be known fully apart from the distinctively Christian revelation.

Yet, as Budziszewski argues, it is not clear why Christians should adhere to this exclusion, since from their own perspective it is unreasonable. That is, Christians believe that nature is both good but also wounded by the fall of man. Nature is good and intelligible, but only imperfectly so. As a result, man's thirst for knowledge of meaning should open his mind to knowledge of the "supernatural remedy" for nature's disorders. Understood in this way, a contribution to the public discourse that proposes the gospel as true and of essential importance to man as man does no violence to reason, since it offers something that it expects reason to embrace after it has heard of it. This is John Paul II's position as well. That is why he presents the gospel as a kind of key to man: a revealed truth that, once revealed, reason recognizes, as it were, even if it could not have discovered it on its own. Certainly proposing such a revealed truth in the public square is no more an affront to reason than a doctrine holding that such claims must not appear in the public square at all—that is, a doctrine that tries to limit the data to which public reason has access.

Finally, Gary Glenn's paper offers an interesting and thought-provoking critique of my use of the term *tyranny* to describe what John Paul II calls the "culture of death." As was the case with Ken Grasso, I don't think that in the end we are fundamentally at odds. Rather, our thinking tends to converge. Glenn begins by finding my use of tyranny to be problematic, but, after pointing out some of the questions it raises, he concludes that it may be useful. For my part, I began by thinking that this use of the term would be straightforward and unproblematic (at least, that is, if one accepts, even hypothetically, John Paul II's moral premises); having read Professor Glenn's paper, I now can see how one might at first find it inappropriate, especially in view of the fact that tyranny is usually understood as some form of direct political oppression, rather than a kind of legitimization of some forms of private domination. Glenn contends that the "modern" tyranny that I say John Paul II perceived is a new form of tyranny. I think that understanding is compatible with John Paul II's argument. The pope contends that human dignity, the kind of respect owed to human beings, is not fully understood except in the light of Christian revelation. It is consistent with his thought, therefore, to say that the Christian revelation would modify the standard according to which we would judge what is tyrannical.

I would like, however, to offer some further thoughts on Glenn's paper. I think these thoughts do not manifest a disagreement between us, but simply seek a further clarification of the issues at play in my book and his remarks on it. It is helpful to distinguish two senses

in which John Paul II uses the term “culture of death.” The expression most obviously refers to the practical abuses with which he is most immediately concerned: the public acceptance of abortion, suicide, and euthanasia. It also refers more broadly, however, to the whole climate of thought underpinning these abuses. Thus the “culture of death” in this broader sense refers to the widespread moral presuppositions—such as individualism, hedonism, moral relativism, and practical atheism—that the pope thinks are supporting the aforementioned specific wrongs. At least in this broader sense, one could recognize this culture of death as a kind of tyranny that would be recognized in principle by the ancients, for two reasons. First, the elevation of individualism, hedonism, and relativism surely are equivalent to, or at least closely akin to, what Plato presents as tyranny *in the soul*: the domination of the better part of the soul by the worse parts. Once we accept that there are no rationally discernible standards by which to judge some human activities as better or more elevated or more human than others, what remains is the power of the desires, and more precisely the most powerful bodily desires. So in this sense the “culture of death” is tyrannical in that it fosters a kind of character manifesting what Plato would surely recognize as tyranny in the soul.

There is a connection, moreover, between this system of moral convictions (or amoral convictions) and a more obviously political tyranny. In Plato’s dialogues, for example, it is precisely those characters who are most skeptical about the possibility of moral knowledge and who at the same time most insistently equate happiness with the satisfaction of non-moral and non-intellectual desires (such as Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, or Callicles in the *Gorgias*) who also most openly endorse political tyranny as the best way of life for those who can achieve it. In addition, one can observe that a people that embraces hedonism, individualism, and relativism could not understand politics in any way other than one that would in principle amount to what Aristotle understood as tyranny in the *Politics*: a regime that looks to the advantage of the ruler rather than the common good.² For on these presuppositions, nothing can be more authoritative than one’s own advantage.

On the level of the more specific abuses with which the pope is concerned, the relationship between his diagnosis and the ancient account of tyranny becomes more problematic, as Glenn correctly observes. To call legalized abortion a form of tyranny is not that surprising if one were to accept one of John Paul II’s basic assumptions: namely, that fetuses are people, too. But it does seem to express some new understanding of tyranny, as Glenn notes, insofar as Plato and

Aristotle seem to have had no problems with abortion and infanticide. In fact, one could make Glenn's point even more sharply by noting that both Plato and Aristotle seem to have presented abortion and infanticide as practices that would be common *in the best regime*.

Nevertheless, while this suggests that Plato and Aristotle would not have regarded such practices necessarily as evidence of tyranny, neither is it the case that their approval of them manifests what John Paul II calls the "culture of death."³ For Plato and Aristotle's approval of abortion and infanticide arises not from an embrace of hedonism, individualism, and moral relativism. Just as the abolition of the family in the *Republic* results not in free love but in an even more stringent subordination of sexual desire to the common good, so the destruction of some vulnerable life in the Platonic or Aristotelian best regime arises not from an intention to suit individual desires but in support of a community organized with a view to the highest human activities. So, I think it fair to say that from John Paul II's perspective, even though Plato and Aristotle make a moral mistake in endorsing these practices, their error is not so deeply rooted as is the error of the modern culture of death. Plato and Aristotle's error here does not result from the same kind of radical misunderstanding of what it is that makes life good and worth living as one finds in the culture of death, and, for that matter, in the intellectual architects of liberal modernity.

While the ancients do not fully appreciate the loftiness of man and his vocation—understanding of which depends for John Paul II on knowledge of the Christian revelation—they nevertheless possess a higher view of man than do the theoretical founders of liberal modernity. For the likes of Hobbes and Locke, man is primarily a clever animal, and his good is accordingly understood in materialistic and hedonistic terms: that is, as comfortable self-preservation. Plato and Aristotle, in contrast, view man and his end in terms that come much closer to the conception articulated by John Paul II on the basis of the Gospel. For these classical political philosophers, man is much more than a clever animal: He has unique capacity to pursue what is noble or beautiful in his actions and to seek what is true in his thoughts. Again, this is not yet an understanding of man's vocation to achieve union with God through love, but it is enough to ground some appreciation for man's unique value among living beings. For this reason, despite all the abuses of the ancient world, and the progress of humanity or compassion in the modern world, the errors of liberal modernity and the culture of death are, in an important respect, much worse than a mere reversion to the pre-Christian anthropology of the pagan philosophers.

Notes

1. Pope John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), p. 97.
2. *Politics* 1279a25-1279b10.
3. I recognize that Professor Glenn is not making the claim that the ancients' failure to recognize abortion as a form of tyranny means that John Paul II would regard them as proponents of the culture of death. But I think the point is nevertheless worth clarifying.