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Book Review by Vincent Phillip Muñoz

THE SOUL OF LIBERTY

Conscience and Its Enemies: Confronting the Dogmas of Liberal Secularism, by Robert P. George.
ISI Books, 384 pages, \$29.95



A FRONT-COVER BLURB FOR *CONSCIENCE and Its Enemies* proclaims Robby George “[t]his country’s most influential conservative Christian thinker.” His claim to that title is made abundantly clear in this collection of incisive, accessible essays, which seeks to expose and confront the dogmas of liberal secularism while also directing and deepening modern conservatism.

George, who holds the McCormick Professorship of Jurisprudence at Princeton University, builds his conservatism around “three pillars” he says stand at the foundation of any decent society: respect for the human person, respect for the family, and a “fair and effective system of law and government.”

Respect for the human person means recognizing the profound, inherent, and equal worth of every member of the human family “irrespective not only of race, sex, or ethnicity but also of age, size, stage of development, or condition of dependency.” A community that fails to respect the basic human dignity of all persons, George contends, will sooner or later regard some “as mere cogs in the larger social wheel” and, therefore, as disposable.

One of his primary aims here is to discredit the idea that one can be personally opposed to abortion but nonetheless favor its legal protec-

tion. He mocks the Left’s tired trope, recently repeated by Nancy Pelosi, that “I don’t think anybody can tell you when...human life begins.” Actually, George reports, “modern science long ago resolved the question.” Basic biology recognizes that human life begins when the fusion of an egg and sperm produces a new, complete, living organism. Those guided by scientific facts know that life begins at conception.

Because intelligent, honest abortion advocates long ago recognized this, they moved on to argue that although life may begin at conception, personhood does not. Princeton bioethics professor Peter Singer at the University Center for Human Values—perhaps the most interesting and candid pro-abortion advocate—stated the matter bluntly a number of years ago in a letter to the *New York Times*. “The crucial moral question,” Singer wrote, “is not when human life begins, but when human life reaches the point at which it merits protection.”

GEORGE FORCEFULLY EXPOSES THE frightening implications of this pro-choice philosophy. It necessarily holds that some humans are “pre-personal” and “post-personal,” and that “full persons” can dispose of these non-person humans as

they wish. Stripped down to its essence, the philosophy undergirding the abortion license is the same as that embraced by the worst totalitarian regimes known in human history, not to mention the defenders of chattel slavery in America. Uncomfortable as it may be, George’s argument also deserves a hearing by pro-choice Republicans and libertarians, especially those who believe the legal availability of abortion follows from a commitment to individual liberty. It forces them to confront the realities that society either respects all human persons or it doesn’t; and if it doesn’t, it slides toward a utilitarian ethic that, in George’s words, “vaporizes the very idea of natural rights.” His lesson is that no individual’s liberty can be secure in a state that allows some to determine the moral worth of others.

As students of Harry V. Jaffa know, in American history that lesson is taught most effectively by the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Singer’s pro-choice argument rejects the idea that “all men are created equal.” More generally, abortion advocates unwittingly take the position of Stephen Douglas. Just as Douglas held that each state and territory should decide for itself whether or not to adopt slavery, they say each woman should determine for herself whether to choose abortion. Both



abortion advocates and Douglas raise “popular sovereignty” over human equality, and, in doing so, abandon the very foundation of American democracy. In addition to marshaling the science of embryology, George might have more clearly invoked the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the statesmanship of Abraham Lincoln in support of the pro-life cause.

RESPECT FOR THE RIGHT TO LIFE IS NOT the only lesson George offers to libertarians and socially liberal Republicans. He reminds us that individuals are born into families and, without properly formed families, individuals and society suffer. Family breakdown leads to the poverty and social pathologies that, in turn, lead to demands for big government. Those who want to limit the size and scope of government, not to mention protect the most vulnerable members of society, should strive to cultivate healthy, stable families.

For George, this means, first and foremost, protecting the traditional family. No academic has more forcefully or articulately defended traditional marriage. He presents his full philosophical defense (with the aid of his former students Ryan Anderson and Sherif Girgis) in *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (reviewed by Hadley Arkes in the Summer 2013 CRB). *Conscience and Its Enemies* offers a one-chapter primer titled “What Marriage Is—and What It Isn’t.” To understand marriage, George reasons, one has to start with a proper understanding of the human person. Human beings, he continues, are embodied souls—a unity of mind, body, and spirit. A full union between persons, therefore, includes bodily union, and that is only possible organically between one man and one woman.

Advocates of homosexual marriage have a response, of course; namely, that individuals of the same sex can love one another, so why shouldn’t they, too, be allowed to marry? George’s counter-argument is to identify the implications of this position and how it rests on an impoverished understanding of personhood. The modern liberal view, he says, reduces the person to a collection of conscious desires. It suppresses the body and our natural bodily sexuality and, in its place, elevates the experience of felt emotions. Gay marriage advocates fail to appreciate the full spectrum of human personhood, and thus they fail to understand what marriage is.

One suspects that few partisans on either side of the marriage debate will be persuaded by such reasoning. But whatever the merits of his argument, George is undoubtedly successful in showing that a serious, philosophical argument for traditional marriage exists, one

that is broadly philosophical rather than more narrowly religious or sectarian. That alone, one hopes, will render untenable claims that homosexual marriage’s opponents are nothing more than homophobes spewing hatred.

The book’s essays supporting George’s third pillar of society, a “fair and effective system of law and government,” pertain to the political ecology needed to sustain a healthy liberal democracy. He reminds us that constitutional structures, important as they are, are not enough; citizens must understand them and possess sufficient virtue to live well within them. Both instances require citizens and their representatives to remember that “moral truth matters,” in George’s words. Far from leading to an intrusive or an overbearing state, the recognition of moral truths about the nature of the human person and the common good are the foundational principles for liberal democracy and establish the proper limits on governmental authority.

Here again Professor George offers lessons for libertarians, especially those who believe moral skepticism is the only sure foundation for limited government. In two superb chapters on religious liberty, he grounds our “first freedom” in man’s capacity for reason and the natural law as opposed to human willfulness and Rawlsian liberalism. A short chapter titled “Private Acts, Public Interests” explains why the public has an interest in regulating the seemingly private act of viewing pornography. “In a society in which sex is depersonalized, and thus degraded,” George writes, “even conscientious parents will have enormous difficulty transmitting to their children the capacity to view themselves and others as persons rather than objects of sexual desire and satisfaction.” Other chapters, all eminently readable, offer his sensible thoughts on affirmative action, judicial review, and immigration.

THREE ADDITIONAL FEATURES OF THE book, not easily classifiable, deserve mention. Eight short chapters portray George’s friends and foes. Highlights include an exposé of Harry Blackmun’s superficiality, a devastating dressing down of Andrew Sullivan, and a touching reminiscence of Father Richard John Neuhaus. Second, those looking for a straightforward introduction to “the new natural law” will find the chapter “Natural Law, God, and Human Dignity” quite helpful.

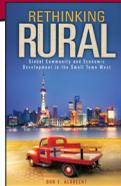
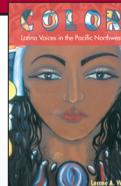
Finally, the book offers a very good essay on the value and purpose of a true liberal education, “Liberalism, Liberation, and the Liberal Arts.” Here, George nicely contrasts today’s impoverished version with an older, richer understanding. Contemporary advocates of “critical thinking” are too often preoccupied

with liberating their students from traditional mores, especially traditional sexual mores, and empowering them to seek their true authentic self. Reason is held to be the instrumental slave of the passions, so finding one’s passion (not to mention indulging others while looking for it) is thought to be the purpose of college life. The older understanding, George explains, focused not on creating the self but on improving one’s soul. It upheld self-mastery—placing one’s desires under the control of one’s reason—as the mark of a true liberal education. It therefore sought to direct young minds toward the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

The pursuit of truth, of course, has led some great minds to reject the very possibility and desirability of self-mastery, so much more could be said on the subject. Nonetheless, Robert George’s account of liberal education, like all the essays in *Conscience and Its Enemies*, is a fantastic starting place for reflecting on the subject addressed. Intended for a wide audience, the book deserves one.

Vincent Phillip Muñoz is the Tocqueville Associate Professor of Political Science and Law at the University of Notre Dame and editor of *Religious Liberty and the American Supreme Court: The Essential Cases and Documents* (Rowman and Littlefield).

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