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James V. Schall: Another Sort of Learning Study Guide

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**JAMES V. SCHALL: ANOTHER SORT OF LEARNING
STUDY GUIDE, 2003-2008
Steven Alan Samson**

PREFACE

Study Questions

1. What does the author mean by calling ours “an age of perfectionism” whose “utopian premises” the classical and Christian traditions can free us? What are the signs of human fallibility? Why are our hearts so often led astray? Who is this book written *for*?

CHAPTER ONE: ANOTHER SORT OF LEARNING

Study Questions

1. Why are used book stores important to intellectual life? [Today, I would add Amazon.com]. What are two types of education? What else is needed?

CHAPTER TWO: WHY READ?

Study Questions

1. What is meant by a “liberal education?” How does it free us? What is the purpose of learning?

CHAPTER THREE: WHAT A STUDENT OWES HIS TEACHER

Study Questions

1. What is the importance of Augustine’s “interior truth” to learning? What is the character of the teacher-student relationship? What are some of the specific obligations students have toward their teachers?

CHAPTER FIVE: ON TEACHING THE IMPORTANT THINGS

Study Questions

1. What are the implications of Eric Voegelin’s observation that we always act as if we were immortal? What is “the tremendous examination of life,” as G. K. Chesterton called it? Why is “the most dangerous thing in the world . . . to be alive?”

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE SUPERNATURAL DESTINY OF MAN

Study Questions

1. What is “the modern project”? Why did Leo Strauss believe we ought to study the classics? Is politics the consummation of life, as Aristotle held? What produces a modern totalitarian state? How can the Shakespearean art help us? What do you think Father Schall means by the “political implications of chastity?”
2. What is the danger of political monasticism? Why is the City of God not the proper object of worldly politics? What is Allen Tate’s [corrected spelling] lost truth? Why did the testimony of Jews and Christians living under Marxist states go unheeded in the West?

Review

Leo Strauss
Eric Voegelin
Neo-Thomism

Hannah Arendt
the modern project
Frederick D. Wilhelmsen

Jacques Maritain
Thomist tradition
political monasticism

CHAPTER NINE: ON DOCTRINE AND DIGNITY: FROM “HERETICS” TO “ORTHODOXY”

Study Questions

1. For Gilbert Keith Chesterton, what is the ultimate peril of the intellect? What is the “thought that stops thought?” Who is the “heretic” and how does he differ from the “orthodox” thinker? What is meant by the Fall? Why are the Creeds important? What must be done to change man?
2. According to Eric Voegelin, does human nature change? For what do we need teachers? What is the thesis of Strauss’s *Persecution and the Art of Writing*? How does it apply to Chesterton? How, as a public intellectual, did he get marginalized? What kind of Christianity does Chesterton stand for? As opposed to what? How would you characterize his warning against eugenics and what Schall calls “the absolute genetic state?” [The appendix to Michael Crichton’s *State of Fear* discusses that pseudo-science]. What is the merit of tradition? What makes the Incarnation an answer to philosophical questions?
3. What does Chesterton mean by saying that he found established intellectual arguments against the Incarnation to be “common nonsense”? What, according to Flannery O’Connor, were heretics forced to do? What service have the great heretics done for us? According to Stanley Jaki, what does Christian theology help us to do? What is one of the great arguments for being a Christian?
4. What does denying the possibility or actuality of human evil imply? Why are we to be philosophers ourselves?

Review

Russell Kirk
Rudyard Kipling
the Creeds
Flannery O'Connor

the heretic
George Bernard Shaw
second nature
Stanley Jaki

the Fall
H. G. Wells
tradition

CHAPTER TEN: ON EVIL AND THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUFFERING

Study Questions

1. What does Schall mean by saying that the “fires of hell are the daily fare of modern ideologies?” [A few years earlier, James Billington had published *Fire in the Minds of Men*]. What is the danger of “hypostatizing” [treating something as a distinct substance or entity] evil? How does our conception of evil differ so radically from the medieval view? Whence does Jeffrey Burton Russell’s “intellectual agony” lead?
2. Where did Russell’s studies in the history of evil begin? What is the real problem with his theory and with his operative definition? To what absurdity does Russell’s discussion of the mouse lead? [The satirist Al Capp came up with a similar creature, the Shmoo, in “Li’l Abner”]. Without these two doctrines [the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body], why may the problem of evil and suffering be unsolvable?
3. Where do the philosophy of R. C. Zaehner lead and the humanitarianism of Michael Harrington lead? Where does the thought of abolishing pain and suffering lead? What was Thomas Aquinas’s view of evil? What point does Flannery O’Connor make about grace? What point does Russell miss? What, according to C. S. Lewis, is the proper locus for thinking about suffering?

Review

Jeffrey Burton Russell
R. C. Zaehner

hypostatizing evil
Michael Harrington

C. S. Lewis

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE OBSCURE HEART OF IDEOLOGY

Study Questions

1. How does the desire for the good **by itself** make evil possible in our kind? Where do Gnostics tend to locate evil? According to Aristotle, who concocts the greatest evils? [The term “alienated elite” suggests much the same as Roger Scruton’s “culture of repudiation” and Kenneth Minogue’s “political moralism”]. Why is moderation required of the public order? [There is a reference to Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*].
2. What is man in the thinking of the “coercive utopians”? [Jean-Paul Sartre called man a “useless passion”]. According to Igor Shafarevich, where does the socialist mind lead? Does Schall regard Plato’s *The Republic* as an example [Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* sees Plato, Hegel, and Marx as enemies of the “open society”].
3. Who are the “coercive utopians” (or “liberal fascists”)? What double service does the

Isaacs' book perform? Joachim of Flora (of the Joachimite heresy) predicted that the world would end in the 13C. Why are Jews so often going in the direction of realism while Christian intellectuals are moving in the opposite direction: toward abstraction and collectivities? Who are the most dangerous persons in our society (p. 133)?

Review

Gnosticism
Joachim of Flora

alienated elite

Igor Shafarevich

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE RECOVERY OF PERMANENT THINGS

Study Questions

1. What are the characteristics of the "Christian essay" as a literary genre? Where is its audience? [Actually, quite a long discussion].
2. According to the historian Christopher Dawson, what makes Western civilization unique? What made that [urban] civilization, dating back to pre-Christian times, universal and dynamic? What does our condition of imperfection do for us? [The missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul probably did more to reshape Europe than the whole line of Caesars]. What difficulties attend this quest for the best? [René Girard's observations about scapegoating certainly apply here].
3. What difficulties arise when we confuse the best with the merely legitimate? What is the major temptation of the modern mind? What are the consequences of seeking "the best" in our world? [The reference to Aristotle's "distributive justice" is to works such as *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls; the title of Jimmy Carter's campaign book, *Why Not the Best?*, also comes to mind. The economist Lord P. T. Bauer criticized redistributive schemes that would only deepen poverty].
4. What is defective about contemporary redistribution theories? What view of man, the world, and their own mission are suggested? [Here again, Voegelin's "Gnosticism," Minogue's "political moralism," and Scruton's "culture of repudiation" are evident]. What tragic assumption lurks behind the various redistributive schemes? [The same intellectual arrogance characterized the old eugenics movement, which Michael Crichton pithily critiqued in the appendix to *State of Fear*]. What does Irving Kristol think of the egalitarian propositions of Martin Rein and others?
5. How can we be "moderate" in politics? What is the Augustinian view of politics, according to John East? How does it help restore the permanent things? Why, according to Maurice de Wulf, does the human person possess the right to realize his happiness? [Modern totalitarian states and ideologies play the potter and treat the people as mere clay for their projects. John Dewey's "instrumentalism" led him to call for a "common faith:" secular humanism].
6. Why do we have theories of redemption today like that of Michael Harrington [who was once a part of the Catholic Worker movement] and theologies of Christology that attack "structural evils" to eliminate human suffering?

Review

Christian essay
Irving Kristol
recovery of permanent things

Christopher Dawson on Western civilization
St. Augustine
John East
P. T. Bauer

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE HUMANITIES AND THE “BASIS OF EXCELLENCE”

Study Questions

1. What is the basis of excellence? What is the paradox of our era? It gives rise to a tendency to blame others, a form of scapegoating. What is the argument in favor of cultural freedom or leisure? Why should truth (and art) be loved? How does public policy relate to the humanities?
2. What, according to Schall, does Plato's *The Republic* teach about justice? Why did Socrates argue in *The Apology* that a philosopher ought to remain a private citizen? Given the perennial conflict between truth and any political order, what are some considerations to guide the choice whether tyranny or democracy is the most or least dangerous to truth? What does Solzhenitsyn say?
3. What is required to recognize freedom and virtue? What do the classics teach about the relationship of democracy and tyranny? In what area might both freedom and virtue exist? Why, according to Edward Johnson, was Harvard College founded? Why, according to William Bennett, were the humanities disappearing? What is the effect of subsidizing them? What is the danger of Helene Moglen's view? To what sort of community does it lead? [Again, Dewey's instrumentalism is evident].
4. What is the utopian position? What does this perfectionism require? Where has it led? In what context must justice be understood? Why, according to Aquinas, is revelation necessary beyond reason? When is the public good most in danger (from the Machiavellian project)? What does civilization depend on?

Review

leisure
Edward Johnson
perfectionism

The Republic
William Bennett
Thomas Aquinas

The Apology
Helene Moglen