Robert R. Reilly: What is the most important thing you teach?

James V. Schall: One could approach this question several ways: "What is the most important course?" or "What is the most important idea?" or "What is the most important thing that you want students to come away from in your classes having learned?"

For more than 30 years now, I have been teaching the same course every semester, ranging in size from 90 to 100 students. It is called — an old-fashioned title, I suppose — *Elements of Political Theory*. The title I inherited from the department. In my mind, it is a political philosophy course in the broadest sense of that word.

To do political philosophy right, you have to include things beyond it, like metaphysics and revelation, and things below it, like practical political life and economics. Geography and history come in, as do wars and rumors of war. Politics, as Aristotle said, is the highest of the practical sciences, but not the highest science as such. This means that politics is limited by what it is not: Politics does not make man to be man, but takes him from nature and guides him to be good, as Aristotle also said.

Still, I suspect the most important thing I assume in teaching is that students be themselves docile — that is, as I like to put it, that they be "eminently teachable." I like the remark of Allan Bloom in *Shakespeare's Politics*: "A man is most what he is as a result of what he does; a man is known, not simply by his existence, but by the character of his actions — liberal or greedy, courageous or cowardly, frank or sly, moderate or profligate." To be teachable means that a student first realizes in his soul that he does not already know too much. Nor is his purpose in learning simply about grades. Aristotle's notion that there are things worth knowing "for their own sakes" strikes me as the most important thing I have to teach.

But it is not enough to say, "Look here, son, you need to know about, say, Dante or Cicero." It is alright to say this to him, of course, and a teacher should say it. Authority means something, gives directions. What needs to happen, however, is that a student sees in his own soul that something both can be learned and is worthy of being known. Indeed, he needs suddenly to rouse himself and find delight in something that he now knows. There is a delight in knowing unlike any other delight, the absence of which, as Aristotle also said, is a very dangerous thing, especially for politicians.

Robert R. Reilly: What is the hardest thing to teach, in the sense of the receptivity of the students to it?

James V. Schall: One is tempted to say "the truth." Chesterton's famous quip, which I often cite, is pertinent here: "There is no such thing as an uninteresting subject, only uninterested people." Yves Simon has a very insightful section in *A General Theory of Authority* that he titled "Freedom from the Self." In an age of self, and self-expression, this notion that our very selves can be obstacles to our own freedom comes as a shock. "Freedom from our very selves?" What can this mean? The whole idea of virtue is that we will only see ourselves if we choose a proper end and means to achieve it. The old monks used to speak of "conquering ourselves." They spoke of this inner war of ourselves against ourselves as the most difficult and perhaps dangerous enterprises of all. It is a Platonic idea, to be sure. All disorder of the world originates in disorder of soul. If we do not learn this truth, nothing else will much matter; we are bound to get it wrong, because we choose to see things wrongly.
Thus, if we do not know we have a soul, if we are just a bundle of emotions and drives, we will never be sufficiently free of ourselves to see what is not ourselves. No freedom is more precious than that of seeing clearly, delightedly what is not ourselves. We are, as it were, self-insufficient. And that, in a way, is the best thing about us. We look to others to know what we really are. We are not merely coupling and political animals, as Aristotle said, but, as he also said, beings who wonder about what it is all about. The beginnings of this wonderment are precious moments in our lives. It often happens through first loves, or through being struck by something we never saw before or even heard of. It can even happen in a university class.

Robert R. Reilly: You have said that the one thing of which you can be sure is that all your incoming students at Georgetown will be relativists. What is there left to appeal to in them?

James V. Schall: Actually, that was a reference to Allan Bloom, who applied it to most all incoming students in any university. It is what they learned from the culture. Student relativists are often secondhand ones, however. By that I mean that they have heard this mild skepticism from a sharp teacher in high school, or from watching an intellectual program on PBS, or from being frustrated in their own search for explanations of even the simplest of things. I also suspect that it often has some relation to divorce in the family.

What is there left to appeal to? Much, I think. I am rather fond of that famous remark of C. S. Lewis, that the young atheist can never be too careful of what he reads. And this is very true. The really frightening thing for many students is the suspicion that there may well be cogent arguments for the truth of things. They are even more astonished when they begin to suspect that the argument for revelational things has much more to be said for it than anyone ever told them about. We should never forget that 20-year-old students, like ourselves once, are indeed only 20 years old. Each person has a capacity for the adventure that each soul in its very creation stands for: the adventure of seeking to know what it is all about.

All I really ask a student to bring with him to class is himself — not a computer, not even a pencil. I will read with them what I have myself pondered and read over and over again for many years. I am still astonished by these things. A professor can make no student see what is there, but he can call his attention to things that are, in their own ways, remarkably insightful and profound. Often college students are too young yet — 20 is still quite young for intellectual things, as Plato never tires of telling us. We are fools if we think that great things do not mostly require time and growth. Aristotle said that the young are not fit for politics because they lack experience. It is not in politics alone that this condition is present in them. But the whole adventure of being young is that you suspect that you have begun something about whose end you have only the vaguest notion, even when you are fortunate enough to be able to state it in Platonic or revelational terms.

Robert R. Reilly: You often quote Socrates in saying that the worst thing a man can do is to lie in his soul about the good. How deeply embedded is that lie in today's culture from which these students come?

James V. Schall: Yes, to have a lie in our soul about what is, this is the very worst thing that can happen to us. No one could put such a lie there but we ourselves. We usually put it there because we want to lie to ourselves in order to continue doing what does not conform to the proper order of our soul. The Socratic phrase is extremely evocative, I think. It is again a theme that we touched on earlier. The ultimate drama is that, while remaining ourselves, we are called out of ourselves, often even through encountering the most pedestrian things, but more often through the fine things like friendship.
What always makes me realize that it is all worthwhile is that I almost never meet students who do not already in their young lives wonder what friendship is about. The greatest treatments of the topic are still in Aristotle and the Gospel of John. This is, ultimately, the topic, when carefully spelled out, that gets to the very heart of the Trinity, if we are willing to pursue it far enough. No one can avoid attending to the meaning of this experience.

The Holy Father recently spoke of the degree to which habits and customs in a culture could obscure or even eliminate our awareness of the right order of the soul. This recalled Aquinas's question about whether the natural law could be "blotted out" of the human soul. Aquinas thought it could come pretty close, though not entirely.

In speaking of Machiavelli, I always tell the students that there is nothing in Machiavelli, that is, no horrid deed of man, that is not already in Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. The difference between Machiavelli and Aristotle was not that Machiavelli knew something that Aristotle did not. Machiavelli has obviously gotten many of his most troubling precepts from Aristotle, who knew exactly what a tyrant was and told us so. The difference between them was, of course, that Machiavelli held that it was all right to do what Aristotle held that it was not. The difference was choice, not knowledge.

The point I want to make with regard to your last question about the culture is that, however much customs and habits corrupt, there can always remain a spark of light within individual souls. By virtue of chance reading, a tragedy — political or personal, a love, a sacrifice; one can be awakened to act contrary to the disorder in the culture. We still must at least suspect that more souls were actually saved in a concentration camp than in a university faculty, a television office, a business, or government bureaucracy. The latter worlds are not closed off either. However deeply embedded the "lie" is in either our soul or our culture, the adventure of a return to sanity remains possible. In its own way, I suppose, even damnation is an adventure, as stories depicting the devil seem always to remind us. But hopefully they teach us that there are certain adventures on which we do not want to embark.

Robert R. Reilly: Can you inoculate students against this influence? How?

James V. Schall: I suppose, using your metaphor, I do not want to "inoculate" anybody against anything, except perhaps the flu. What you mean, of course, is to ask if there's a way for the student to become aware of the inbuilt presuppositions of the culture that affect him almost without his realizing it. Tracey Rowland, in her important book *Culture and the Thomist Tradition*, has shown that within a culture itself are already operative principles and presuppositions that, if we are not specifically aware of them, will serve to direct our efforts in the way of the habits within the culture. If these habits are disoriented, the person who assumes that the culture is morally neutral will find himself going along with the presuppositions of the culture to his own detriment.

We forget the enormous attraction of prestige. If it is in an important journal, or on a famous television program, or the normal presuppositions of a famous university, we will assume that this view is on the cutting edge. But this is surface. In this area, there is no saving of someone who won't be saved. What I try to do, rather, is to introduce students to books and authors who are articulate, intelligent, and persuasive, so that they will begin to see that intelligence is not wholly on the side of disorder of soul. Students, I think, are really crying for some guidance or hint of what else is there. They are astonished to find so much whose existence is not even hinted at. But someone has to give them a start. It does not take much to arouse a suspicion in their minds that they have not heard the whole story. An essay of Chesterton or C. S. Lewis is often enough to provoke interest.
Students also need living examples, though often the greatest teachers have long been dead. There are few places, however, in which there are not one or two teachers who are aware of the problem. Eric Voegelin once remarked that we do not have to participate in the disorders of our time. I think this is true. We may not become famous, but we can hold our own counsel about the meaning of things. Thus, the primary way to "inoculate" is to let them know that there is some other source of persuasive argument and knowledge that is not being honestly presented in the university they attend. Once they at least suspect this deficiency and are exposed and understand a few books or essays that make sense, common sense, the student is pretty safe, I think.

Robert R. Reilly: How discouraged are you at the degraded level of public discourse in America today? What is the path to recovery? Can it come politically?
James V. Schall: A nation has to live with the choices it makes. We were extremely fortunate that George W. Bush was president on 9/11, I think. Whether we will be so fortunate the next time, I am not optimistic. The country seemingly will not face the fact that it has an enemy that is often much shrewder and more determined than its own leaders. It is not so much that "public discourse" is degraded, but the moral level of the society itself, particularly as this level, is encouraged or reinforced by law.

Nations rise and fall. We are no exception. And the rise and fall usually have rather much to do with the internal moral condition of the souls of the citizens. What we choose to make of ourselves is not immune from external and political consequences. A political recovery is certainly part — though not the most important part — of the problem. We look on public decency and morality as an internal or personal problem. It is that, but much more. No fault or sin can fail to have external consequences, no matter how "private." The distinction of public and private is useful and has a real basis in fact.

The path to recovery cannot bypass this inner-soul issue. We forget that we are not made for this world, even though we are by nature political animals. No public order is anything but transient, even if it has lasted several centuries, as has ours. Modern ideology has tried to convince us that the main thing that we are here for is to form some future utopia down the ages. What is new is perhaps the rise of Islam, which more or less holds the same thing; namely, that it seeks to conquer the whole world for Allah. But this latter is so inadequate as both an inner-worldly purpose and a description of transcendent destiny that it borders on the same goals as later ideology.

I sometimes think that, above all, we need a proper understanding of heaven. Peter Kreeft has a good book on this topic. (In fact, Peter Kreeft has a good book on just about everything worthwhile.) We sometimes cannot or will not understand that the most fundamental issues are theological. But they are not just any theology. Modern liberalism wants to tell us that we dare not confront theological issues because it will cause fanaticism and war. One suspects that not confronting them will cause even greater fanaticism and war.

Robert R. Reilly: Do you think America is misrepresented abroad, especially in the Muslim world, or do they see us as we are, a center of unbelief and corruption?
James V. Schall: It is possible that we are both "misrepresented" and that we have considerable "unbelief and corruption." I am inclined to think that if we were totally pious and virtuous we would be even more misrepresented in the Islamic world. It is not our vices that threaten Islam, but our truth, insofar as we acknowledge it ourselves, which is rather rarely the case.
We may be more deliberately misrepresented in a Europe that is slower to recognize threats to itself than we are. Europe is almost blind in its failure to assist those who have guaranteed its own relative freedom. The current crisis of the world, I think, is more fundamentally in Europe than in Islam. Nothing is more astonishing than the decline in population in Europe. Those who know about Humanae Vitae are not particularly surprised at this decline, which opens Europe to what is, in effect, after Tours and Lepanto, a delayed Muslim invasion. This time, the invasion is not primarily military, which is probably why it is so effective.

We who understand the abidingness of the Fall cannot be overly astonished at widespread unbelief and corruption. We have read our Thucydides, our St. Augustine, and our Burke. The temptation of modern Christians, under the name of social justice, is often to forget or reject Augustine's "political realism." The purpose of our presence in this world is not that one generation is sacrificed to another. We are all equally close to the Godhead. Modern liberalism was often constructed as a way to replace original sin. It thought that it could, by its own powers, establish a world without blemish. We who are Christian recognize that the whole point of salvation through Incarnation was that everyone, if he chose in grace, might be saved, no matter what sort of a regime or culture he lived in. Yet we have to acknowledge, on the basis of modern experience, that politics can go a long way in preventing a proper understanding of human destiny from even being considered.