James V. Schall, a Jesuit priest, is Professor of Government at Georgetown University. His first piece of writing in Modern Age, “Theory in American Politics,” appeared in the Spring 1960 issue. In the essay below, Father Schall stresses that if democracy is to be saved from subjectivism then “truth must become a democratic project.” Those who would enshrine freedom in the name of democracy, he contends, in the end turn it into an absolute as the source of all values. “This is the direction of doctrines which have lost the sense of transcendence or which are explicitly atheistic,” writes Pope John Paul II, who is aptly quoted here. Democracy, Father Schall believes, “cannot merely be a word for the process by which citizens reach decisions. It must have some criterion by which it can judge the moral worth of the content of its own decisions.” What he sees as posing the greatest threat is that form of democratic rule in which American citizens deliberately claim there is no center of judgment, no order, no good, no truth, no certitude, no moral standard. This is the point at which democracy becomes anarchy—“The waste Wide Anarchie of Chaos,” to recall John Milton.

DURING THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN of 1996, in California, President Bill Clinton said that democracy is “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” (October 18, 1996). Clinton recalled that this phrase was in the Constitution. When later reminded that it was not in that famous document, he corrected himself to say that it was in the Declaration of Independence. As it turns out, of course, this oft-repeated passage, the validity of which, no doubt, does not depend on who said it or where, is found in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address of 1863, wherein the hope was expressed, in time of civil war, that this democratic form of rule shall not perish from this earth.

The question is at least worth asking, however, about whether the democratic form of rule, for all its historic hope and importance, can become a dangerous form of rule through its own instruments and processes? The classical writers thought democracy was most dangerous because, in addition to neglecting the standards of virtue, it was also most susceptible to being taken over by a tyrant, who would constitute the worst evil or regime to which political affairs could tend. The question, in other words, is whether we must include, in any discussion of democracy, either as a re-
regime or as a general philosophy of life, not only the origin, purpose, and instrument of rule, that is, the people, but also the element of truth about its understanding of what man is. The last question to be asked, then, is not, "Was this law democratically enacted," but, having been democratically enacted, "Was this law invalid on other grounds; does it promote or destroy the objective good of man?" Truth is defined as the conformity of what is, of what is right, with our minds. We are not free if we do not ask this latter question about the truth of our deeds and actions, if we do not know what is and whether we act according to its exigencies.

"The word democracy, as it is used by modern peoples," the French philosopher Jacques Maritain wrote during World War II, recalling more accurately the same famous phrase from American political history,

...has a wider meaning than in the classical treatises on the science of government. It designates first and foremost a general philosophy of human and political life and a state of mind. This philosophy and this state of mind do not exclude a priori any of the "regimes" or "forms of government" which were recognized as legitimate by classical tradition.... The dynamics of democratic thought leads, as though to its most natural form of realization, to the system of government of the same name, which consists, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, in "government of the people, by the people, for the people."

Awareness that the term democracy can have several meanings, not all good, that must be sorted out, requires careful attention.

Maritain took for granted that the term "democracy" used as a "general philosophy of human and political life and a state of mind" is usually a noble term in modern usage, though he was aware, as was Sir Thomas Browne in the case of the rule of devils, that a certain ambiguity can remain if a people's "general philosophy of human and political life" is itself disordered. That "the people" are always good and virtuous can, in experience and in theory, be legitimately doubted. And it is not enough wittily to respond that democracy is the worst form of government, except in comparison to all others. Ultimately, order and disorder are located in individual human souls, not in human regimes reflective of these same souls.

If, in other words, democracy is but another form of the answer to the classical question of "What is the best regime," it must tell us how it has derived the content of the word "best" with regard to the various forms of regime available to us. Democracy cannot merely be a word for the process by which citizens reach decisions. It must have some criterion by which it can judge the moral worth of the content of its own decisions. Without this latter judgment, we can give no reason why democracy might not also be the worst regime, might not also include a depth of disorder that not even the classical authors contemplated. There is, in fact, an order to the worst regime, which is why it is called worst, why it is intelligible in terms of political philosophy as precisely the worst.

Thus, if we look carefully at this famous definition of Lincoln, we see that it reflects several, but not all, of the elements in St. Thomas's noted definition of law—"An ordination of reason, by the proper authority, for the common good, and promulgated." Both definitions, that of Lincoln and that of Aquinas, touch on the notion of the end or purpose of authority, its final cause, that is, the common good, the people; both locate law's immediate origins in legitimate government, in its popular mode of operation. The people are its immediate efficient cause. Promulgation touches the material cause, with the people's intelligently
receiving and living by the law. But, again, given modern theoretic presuppositions about the autonomous human will, its complete independence from any natural or divine law, no good reason can be given on this basis of procedure or end, about just why a so-called “democratic tyranny” could not validly be deduced from Lincoln’s phrase in a way that it could not be associated with St. Thomas’s definition.

Lincoln did not mention, as Aquinas did, that reason, not will, was the heart of rule, even though this “reason” still had to be grounded in what is and chosen to be put into effect. Lincoln had no stated “formal” cause that would distinguish anything substantial about the content of any law or legal system. Thomas, however, specifically rejected the famous Roman Law dictum that “Whatever pleases the prince, is the law.” The democratic rule of modernity, by contrast, in courts, legislatures, and executives, has come to mean, in effect, that “Whatever the people will, is the law.” If democratically enacted, following proper procedures, there is no such thing as an “unjust law.” All laws become “just” laws simply because they are laws. To maintain that a law is precisely “unjust,” we must have a notion of justice that is not totally identified with what is willed, even willed democratically.

We might still, in fairness, argue that Lincoln presupposed the distinction between just and unjust laws, otherwise there would have been no moral point to the Civil War. But as the definition stands, it could justify a very terrible sort of regime, a kind of regime that seems to be more and more on the horizon for presumably free societies, societies free to do what the people “want,” whatever it is they want. In other words, we could have a presumably democratic society faithful to democratic structure in every way but lacking in any understanding of the truth that already lies in human nature as it has come to be in existence apart from any specifically human will. “What caused the human being to be a human being in the first place?” The unavoidable answer to this question is that it was not political man himself. It was caused by whatever it was that caused man to be man in nature. Democracy, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, implies, but does not explicitly state, that what the people want is, by that very fact, just and right, that what is wanted by the people is true to their being and to the order of the world.

The most pressing question that democracy must ask itself in the twenty-first century is not, then, “What is liberty?”, but rather, not forgetting that first question and its history, the perplexing question, with its literary origin in a First Century A. D. Roman Governor, “What is truth?” If there is a theory of truth that stands contrary to the theory of self-sufficient democracy, then either democracy must achieve its own autonomy by denying the existence of any independent nature on which truth is based or some democratically willed laws must be seen to be unjust, must be seen to be against what is good for man, even if enacted by a democratic majority. In this latter case when democratically enacted laws are themselves seen to embody injustice, democracy will presuppose a truth about human nature and life that it did not itself formulate and cause in the first place.

II

When we look in Aristotle we are, or pretend to be, scandalized by the discovery that for him “democracy” had a pejorative connotation. It represented the best of the three worst regimes. Its rule was not for a “common good” but for the good of the ruling principle, which was the will of the morally undisciplined majority. Democracy’s end or defining
purpose was not honor or wisdom or virtue, but "liberty" or freedom. At first sight, to be sure, this purpose seems to us to be praiseworthy, exactly what we want for a democracy. "Give me liberty or give me death!" But the meaning that Aristotle gave to this idea of democratic liberty was not complimentary, though it was realistic. He did not think that democracy was the absolutely worst regime, to be sure, but he saw in it defects of such a serious nature that they would militate against true human good, against "a general philosophy of human and political life," to use Maritain's phrase.

Socrates himself taught that death is sometimes to be preferred to the liberty of the democracy in which we live. And the point at which it is to be preferred is precisely where political will, democratically achieved, conflicts with truth. Socrates knew that the only reason he lived as a philosopher for as long as he did in democratic Athens, some seventy years, was because he remained a private citizen. He implied that there always remains a certain incompatibility between philosophy and politics, between truth and undisciplined opinion and habits. His motto, as it were, was not "Give me liberty or give me death," but rather "Give me truth or give me death." If liberty simply meant not dying, all Socrates had to do was to cease being a philosopher in search of truth. He would have continued to live but at the cost of denying what he was.

The liberty of Socrates depended on his search for truth. There appeared to be two kinds of liberty, the liberty to do what we want, whatever it is we want, and the liberty to do what we ought. What we ought to do depended, in turn, on what was true about us, about what it is we were. In Socrates, as well as later with Christ, these two liberties fatefully clashed. Socrates's real freedom, his freedom to give witness to the truth, was not jeopardized by the politicians and citizens who choose, in a democratic trial, to kill him for not ceasing to seek the truth. He refused to give up his truth in exchange for his life. Thereby, in dying at the hands of the state, he preserved the truth in a way that he could not have accomplished by choosing to live at the cost of denying the truth. His death taught us that there must be a certain correspondence between how we think and how we live, a correspondence that does not derive its truth from how we live, but from how we ought to live.

A democratic regime, the rule of many by the many, is one that is so structured in its constitution that it fosters a kind of freedom that neither knows nor wants to know truth or limits. It implies a kind of random liberty guided by no serious purpose other than desire. The liberties found in democratic regimes in the classical sense are those deriving from a lack of order and internal discipline in the souls of the citizens who seek to do what they "want," not what it is right or noble for them to do. Statecraft is soulcraft; that is, the structure of the state is designed to reinforce the structure of the soul's choices about how it decides to live. Indeed, the very notion that there is, in objective reality, something that can be described as right, true, or noble seems to contemporary opinion to be itself somehow "anti-democratic." We are reluctant to conceive of a liberty that implies discipline, especially self-discipline, a liberty that requires truth, not will.

The first principle of modern democracy has come to be not liberty or truth but "tolerance," something very different from either. Tolerance, as a speculative position, means not just the practical agreement to allow certain arguments to go on in relative peace, but the dogmatic position that no truth can be possible in any sense, that truth as such is, in theory and practice, impossible. The
only sin in modern democracy based on this view seems to be "intolerance." The first victim of this very theory is, paradoxically, truth itself. If what is, is, then all things are not possible. As democratic politicians and citizens, we may want all things to be possible to us because we do not want to admit that any truth can limit our wills and hence our political actions or ways of living. The democrat of this persuasion can be intolerant of only one thing, that is, the philosophic argument that there is truth. The autonomous wills presupposed in this sort of democratic theory of absolute tolerance must embrace in principle what is implicitly self-contradictory: the theoretic position that it is true that there is no truth. The modern democratic man lives uneasily on this paradox, if it is a paradox.

The great and fundamental passage in Scripture that has been, more than any other, understood in our civilization to establish the proper relation of freedom and truth is, however, that which reads, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John, 8:32). Here, reason, revelation, and liberty are joined, not opposed. Truth is not hostile to liberty, but provides its essential condition and foundation. Can one be a democrat and, at the same time, a non-skeptical seeker of the truth? This is our question. How does knowing the truth make us free? Why am I not "freer," as it were, if there is no truth and hence no danger that I might be wrong or in error, no obligation to right myself?

The answer is, of course, that liberty follows upon truth; it does not constitute it. If I know as a fact, say, because I put it there, that there is poison in this apple, I am still free to throw it away, eat it, or give it to someone else to eat. I am technically free to tell someone else that there is poison in this fruit. Also I can lie and say it is simply a ripe apple. But knowing this truth, that there is poison in the apple, and still choosing to eat the apple, I am not free to continue to live. The liberty that the truth gives me, in this case, is the liberty to stay alive, or, for that matter, the liberty to die.

My liberty thus depends both on the truth of what is and on my knowing this truth. If the apple contains the poison, but there is in my theory no possibility of any objective truth in things, then I cannot know for sure whether there is any difference between a good and a poisoned apple. On the hypothesis of theoretic skepticism, not even the reports of science will help me. The fact is, that I cannot live as my theory implicitly demands that I live, not knowing the truth of anything. The logical conclusion from the view that there is no truth, would, in practical terms, be to eat no apple at all, assuming that I did not want to die, or, even if I did, of not knowing how to do so because I cannot be sure of what in fact might cause my death.

If, however, I choose to die, implying that I do know what poison does, then the poisoned apple is quite as good as Socrates's hemlock, which he himself ironically took as an oblation to the God of healing. The problem remains, nonetheless, that if there is no truth, I cannot know whether the apple is or is not poisoned and no one can tell me, one way or another, about the fact; hence, I really cannot act. Socrates, however, was not a skeptic. He knew the hemlock he was ordered by the state to consume would kill him. So did his good jailor, who instructed him in its usage, and all the citizens of Athens. That is why they gave it to him to drink. His freedom consisted in his philosophy, in his not knowing whether death was the worst of evils, as the power of the state seemed to imply. His freedom was in his knowing that doing something wrong was an evil. It was not to be done even at the threat of death. Denying the power of death as the greatest evil, he denied the power of the
state over truth.

The democratic regime, however, is formed in its institutions and way of proceeding so that it fosters this erratic choice of its citizens. The democratic regime in the classics was designed to let any choice exist, irrespective of any truth that might limit it. Merely to recall this principle is to remind ourselves of how close our current democratic practice is to classical theory. The question of what is the true life of man does not arise in such a democratic regime because that would imply that some standard of life worth living needs to be identified and upheld by the regime itself. Classical democracy was hostile both to the notion of what is good and of what is true, except in the sense of what is good or true for me, of what is good or true as defined by me. Yet what is good or true depends on what is, even for me.

Many modern men are vaguely aware of this background to the notion of democracy. Indeed, democracy, even in the early modern era, still had about it the notion of the turbulent rule of the demos, the mob, the rule of those who have no interior rule of soul. In all classic discussions of the differences of regimes, then, even into early modern times, democracy was associated with a dangerous form of rule. Indeed, in Plato, Thucydides, and Aristotle, democracy often proved to be the seed-ground for the tyrant, so that tyrannical regimes most often arose from the moral failures of democratic freedom. Democracy and tyranny were seen to be intimately related.

To be sure, Athens was a democracy and was praised by Pericles for its liberty and style. Yet, this praise came within the context of the very war that ruined Athens for ever. The man most accredited with destroying the democracy of Athens was Alcibiades, the handsome young man who was said by Plato and Thucydides to have loved the people the most, who took his standards from what he perceived that they wanted. American founding fathers for the most part shared this distrust of democracy and preferred the Roman idea of republic to that of democracy.

III

Western public opinion in the modern era, however, has come to believe that truth is the cause of fanaticism, itself the most terrible of the disorders of soul, so it is said. Only a "fanatic" can maintain that something is true. Liberty is opposed to ideology, which, in turn, is a product of liberty. Ideology itself is based on the idea that there is no truth, so that we are free to choose our own "truth" and impose it on the world to make it better. If there is no truth over against which we might judge the ideologies, then we cannot judge too harshly those ideologies seeking to project on the social world their vision of order. The wars of the modern era have come to be wars of contrasting visions of purely man-made orders. Their cruelty does not arise from barbarism, but from intellectual sophistication. After all, if there is, in principle, no truth to which the human intellect is open, why is it so wrong for one erroneous vision to try to replace another erroneous vision? Where there is no truth, there is no compromise, or no need to compromise. But compromise is not the definition of truth. Truth itself can be compromised. As Sir Thomas Browne remarked, in Johnson's recollection, the devils do not war against one another. Even the house of Satan has certain standards, one of which is that it stands for its own order. That is, in some definite sense, there is an order of good as well as an order of evil.

"Without truth, there must be a dissolution of society," Samuel Johnson said. Perhaps it might be worth the trouble to wonder why this great Englishman might have pronounced this startling sentence?
It is immediately evident that if no one ever told the truth about anything, we simply could not communicate. If someone tells me, aside from joking, that my hat is on backwards, when, after my checking, it is not, I begin to lose confidence in my ability to discourse with this person. If everyone tells me it is on backwards, when it is not, I begin to lose confidence even in my own senses. Yet, the truth is that it is on straight. The problem is even more complicated if we tell a baseball catcher, and hence all the modern adolescents who imitate him, that his hat is on backwards. We have oaths to assure us that, at least in some circumstances, we will tell the truth. We justly condemn liars and know that they cause great damage to exchange of goods and to reputation. There is an old sentimental song that begins, "Be sure it's true when you say 'I love you,' for it's a sin to tell a lie...." Somehow, on recalling this line, we are sure that the song has it right, for in matters of love, lying to one another, however common, is indeed the greatest and most destructive of sins, for it corrupts the most intimate of communications.

Moreover, there are two sorts of truth, called in classical literature, theoretical and practical truth. The distinction is important. A speculative or theoretical truth is, as St. Thomas says, "the conformity between mind and reality." We tell the truth when we say of what is, that it is, and of what is not, that it is not. Ultimately, all of our actions, what we put into existence, depend upon our willingness and ability to state the truth of things. We act, presupposing that we know and what we know. Moreover, the very highest of our human powers is simply the power we have to know the truth. This is the faculty of intellect towards which all other faculties and institutions are ultimately aimed. It is also our highest pleasure, the delight in knowing the truth of all that is. It is indeed our destiny.

We cannot fry an egg, for instance, unless we know what an egg is, probably unless we know what a chicken or a duck is. The primitive man who first came upon an egg, we can imagine, did not immediately put it in his beer or on his frying pan until he figured out what it was. We are not free to drink a cup of coffee if we do not know what coffee is. If we think that arsenic is coffee, we are in trouble, even though it is good that arsenic is arsenic and coffee is coffee. But whether we ought to eat an egg or drink a cup of coffee, these are practical truths depending on our relationships to ourselves or others. If our doctor, again assuming he knows what he is talking about and is telling us the truth, assures us that eating an egg will give us mumps, we are in a different position than if he tells us that it will make us big and strong. In both cases, we remain free to eat or not eat the egg. And if the egg we eat is stolen from our neighbor's chicken house, we are in an even more perplexing practical situation.

Practical truth does not refer directly to what is but initially to what it is that comes into existence through our own human causality or power. Practical truth depends on the quality of our theoretical truth, including the theoretical truth about what sort of beings we ourselves are. In so far as we do not know what it is to be a man, we cannot know what it is that a man ought to do with those powers he is given in nature, powers he did not give himself. Practical truth, however, is still truth but it looks at truth in the process of something's coming to be. When St. Thomas spoke of truth being found in things and being found in intellect, he had this background in mind. The truth that is found in things, including natural things, means that in being what they are, their existence as this thing or that is fixed. A turkey is not a tree. Moreover, there is intelligibility in
things by which we call them what they are, because they have a formal cause that makes them a this rather than a that. My mind is said to be true when what I know and say is in conformity with what actually exists and about which I am consciously knowing. My being changes when I know something other than myself. I become more than myself because I have a mind that knows something else that is not me. Indeed, my mind is capable of knowing all things, of all that is. This capacity of my knowing is what makes me different from other beings in the universe.

But once I know things, I can also do things, make things. This capacity that I have to do or to make asks a related but rather different question to truth. And it is in this area of practical truth that politics and ethics exist. Let us suppose that I choose to do or make something. Everything that any human being does or makes is absolutely different from every other action in the history of the world. In this sense, the realm of things put into the world by human choice to do something or make something, constitutes a distinct reality subject to different conditions from other things that already exist but not through human causality. The realm of art or craft refers to those artifacts that are put into existence as the result of human making, paintings, bicycles, hammers. The realm of prudence refers to those actions of my own whereby I change myself.

Artistic truth asks whether what is made is that which the maker intended to make, whether what he conceived in his mind before making came to be as he wanted it to be when it finally existed in reality. Ethical and political truth differs from artistic truth, not in the sense that it is not a result of a human putting into existence something that was not previously there, but in the sense that the object of doing is the man himself in one or other of his aspects or capacities. Practical truth asks the initial question about what it is that I am putting into the world by my own deeds and actions. My actions are true not only when my actions correspond with what I want to do, but also with what I ought to do.

This effort to establish practical truth in my actions means that there can be a conflict between what I want to do and what I ought to do. This sort of conflict can exist on the personal level and on the political level, on the level of human persons acting together. If we argue that the right thing to do is merely what we want to do, with no comparison of that to what we ought to do, it means that we are using an artistic criterion for a moral or ethical action. This is, indeed, the source of Machiavellianism in politics. A good craftsman can be a bad man in his personal or political actions. If the only criterion that we allow for our ethical or political actions is what we want to do, the conformity between our idea of what we want to do and what we in fact do, then whatever we do is right. Obviously, this conclusion cannot be correct. Moral and political actions that we put into the world take their ethical criterion from some understanding of what we ought to do, even if we do not do what we ought.

What does practical truth have to do with the democratic project? What is wrong with a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, no matter what it is, in the end, that a people “want” or choose to do? Or, to put it differently, are there things that ought not to be chosen, even if they are popularly “wanted”? The Declaration of Independence says that men have a right to life, liberty, and to the pursuit of happiness. Do the words, “life,” “liberty,” or “happiness” mean anything in themselves? Or, is their meaning itself political and defined only by positive, that is, man-made, democratic law, as seems now to be the case? Strictly speaking, if the “truth” of a positive law is merely its
proper procedural formulation and passage, no matter what its content, then we can have no such thing as an unjust or immoral law. A legislature or other law-making body could pass intellectually contradictory laws both of which would be correct and moral if nothing but the statement of the law is law.

IV

In his Encyclical on truth, Veritatis Splendor (1993), John Paul II wrote about the need of liberty to be settled in truth.

Certain currents of modern thought have gone so far as to exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values. This is the direction of doctrines which have lost the sense of transcendence or which are explicitly atheistic. The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil. To the affirmation that one has a duty to follow one's conscience is unduly added the affirmation that one's moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience. But in this way, the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity, and "being at peace with oneself," so much so that some have come to adopt a radically subjectivistic conception of moral judgment.

This is a description of the moral philosophy that largely governs our democratic times. The source of "values" is "freedom," which has no other criterion than itself. What results is that no truth can be called upon over against the newer virtues, now elevated to the highest positions. These virtues are sincerity, authenticity, and "being at peace with oneself," virtues with no intrinsic content. These criteria are wholly subjective. To claim that there is a truth over against them strikes at the basic prejudice of modern thought, namely, that nothing *that is* can be over against the individual conscience and freedom.

To save democracy from subjectivism, truth must become a democratic project. The greatest of crimes can be enacted in the name of sincerity, authenticity, and "being at peace with oneself." Each of these criteria looks to one's own estimate of oneself. The classical notion of conscience was that of an ultimate judgment of reason about the objective goodness or badness of each of our acts or deeds. But this judgment was not conceived to be merely the fact that it was our last judgment before we acted, hence the one that determined the morality of the act. It was rather the judgment that compared what we proposed to do with what we ought to do. The criterion of morality was not simply what we choose to do because that is what we choose, but what the good man would do in these particular circumstances. The criterion was never subjective, hence it was not merely a projection of our own uninhibited "values," itself a subjective word, onto the world. This meant that the deed was good by virtue of an artistic, not prudential, judgment of moral things, that is, namely, that what we did was what indeed we intended to do, no matter what it was.

Is truth, then, anti-democratic, or is there no democracy with no truth? If we understand democracy in the Greek sense, already contained within its concept is a criterion of deviation from the law, from the common good. Aristotle held that most regimes were in fact disordered, usually either oligarchies or democracies. He did not maintain that it would ever be otherwise, though there could be a few cities with genuine virtue as their criterion of rule. Modernity sought to refute Aristotle on this point, by lowering the sights of what we could expect of human nature, so that we could call, with some ambiguity, more regimes "democratic" because we did not expect
as much of human nature as Aristotle did. Or else we could propose that we could so increase the material conditions of man that we could erase or minimize the supposedly basic reasons about why men did not choose virtue. This modern assumption implicitly held that it was material goods as such that caused virtue and not moral choice and discipline, even though Aristotle and Aquinas both recognized a certain amount of goods were indeed needed for a minimum of virtue.

The fact is, however, that the worst regimes are not rooted in a paucity of material goods. The worst regimes are the result of reason gone wrong under the guidance of will, particularly the result of the intelligentsia gone wrong. If we can assume that in modern democracies, with their higher levels of education and prosperity, this same principle holds, we might conclude that without truth, modern democracies are the most dangerous forms of regime that have ever been theoretically considered. This position would not deny the thesis of Maritain that one meaning of democracy, hopefully its best meaning, is that general form of understanding and principle that undergirds all good regimes because it is the principle of all true human living rooted in reason, nature, and revelation.

However much we may want to save the word “democracy” to describe the “best regime” and to insist that, because of the development of technology and the general accumulation of knowledge that we have a better chance of bringing this regime into existence, the fact remains that the best regime exists in speech, not in reality, not even in democratic reality. The only possible location for the best regime is the City of God, in St. Augustine’s sense. This realization means that all actual regimes, including the democratic ones, will be imperfect regimes in which the pursuit of truth remains a critical project for the validity of the lives lived in them. It has been said that Socrates lived for seventy years in a democratic regime, a relatively long time. He lived there because a democratic regime cannot tell the difference between a fool and a philosopher. Only when it was forced to decide between the fools and the philosopher, did it choose to kill the philosopher. Modern democracies, it is said, do not do anything so rash as to kill philosophers. What they do is deny truth any status in public so that all philosophers who do not subscribe to this political skepticism must be considered fools whose opinions bear no relation to reality, to a reality that has, in itself, no intrinsic form or cause other than unguided will.

Modern democracy has become the graveyard of philosophers because it has denied truth any legitimate place within its structure. This is why the natural order of good is being replaced within them. In a regime in which truth is declared to be politically dangerous, the philosopher who seeks the truth has no public or private space. He appears to be a fool or a madman when he affirms that there is an order in things including human things. On the hypothesis that there is no order, truth will appear as a threat to the constitution because it claims that there is a criterion by which we can distinguish what we do and what we ought to do.

The democratic project proposed itself as a political movement whereby the potential in man could be brought to actuality and that, in bringing the multiplicity of talents to reality, the regime would be richer, more complete. In itself, intelligence has no choice but to affirm of reality that it is what it is. Human beings are free because their intelligence, in knowing things, in knowing what is, can select what they will do or not do in the pursuit of their end. In choosing what we do, we define our-
selves. We are given our first nature, the nature that causes us to be men and not turtles. But we choose our second nature, the pattern of choices and habits whereby we are called good men or bad men. A democracy that is indifferent in practice or in principle to these choices whereby we are in fact good or bad will ever be a classical democracy. But there can be a form of democracy worse than that conceived by Aristotle and the classics. That would be a form of rule of relatively intelligent citizens deliberately choosing that there is no order, no good, no truth for them. It is possible for a whole people, or most of a whole people, to choose against the good, to deny its obligation to what is true. This is the threat of our time and indeed is the nature of our time.

The democratic project must now include, with freedom, truth, the truth of what we are and what we ought to be. It is quite true that we need a regime that fosters and allows us to seek and to know the truth, a regime of liberty. Nothing can impose the truth except itself, except what is. The freedom to allow reality to confront our intellects with what is most precious. The witness to truth must be a free witness. But the validity of truth does not principally arise from the fact that it is seen in freedom, but that it is seen as what is. If we understand democracy as the best regime, we must understand that it includes the notion that what we choose is also what is true, what is in conformity with the reality of things, including ourselves, that we did not make to be what they are. “Without truth,” to recall Samuel Johnson, “there must be a dissolution of society.”