

BLACKFRIARS

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INTRODUCTION TO THOMIST POLITICS¹

"PLATO by a goodlye similitude declareth," said Sir Thomas More, "why wise men refraine to medle in the common wealthe. For when they see the people swarme into the streets, and daily wet to the skinne with rayne, and yet cannot persuade them to goe out of the rayne and to take their houses; knowynge wel, that if they should goe out to them they shoulde nothings prevail, nor wyne ought by it, but with them be wette also in the rayne, they do kepe them selves within their houses, being content that they be saffe themselves, seinge they cannot remedye the follye of the people." And so, Plato adds, the wise man "is well content if he can in any way live his life here untainted . . . , and, when the time for his release arrives, take his departure amid bright hopes with cheerfulness and serenity." To-day, in the countries where it is still possible, more or less, to speak one's mind, the trouble is this: that while there is surely no ground on which angels are less likely to be ready to tread than the floors of parliaments and chancellories, we for our part are all constrained to rush in, driven no doubt by some kind of epileptic irresponsibility, congenital in human nature; and the upshot is a sort of incessant crossing of the floor of the house of commons; for finding ourselves in violent disagreement with one side we rush incontinent over to the other, where a similar process has been taking place. This means, in practice, that if one manages to convince a friend on Monday of the shortcomings of marxist communism, one runs every risk of finding him on Tuesday sporting the swastika or executing the *passo romano*. This puts the would-be philosopher in an awkward position. Aristotle's doctrine of the golden mean has been derided on

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the score of parsimony; which means of course that it has been completely misunderstood. It has nothing to do with any spinsterish admonition to avoid going too far. The whole point of it is that it is not a niggardly compromise but a synthesis *ex alto*. We are faced to-day, in the Church, with the spectacle of multitudes of people allying themselves more or less with one or other extreme; it is surely time that this rot should stop. But it will not stop until we are clear about the Christian synthesis.

We cannot begin to ask what the state should do or not do unless we first know how it came to be and what it is for. The various answers given to these questions may be reduced to three: two extremes and a mean. With the mean we shall have to deal later; the extremes hold: the one, that the state is the result of the free agreement of individuals, that its sanctions derive solely from that agreement, and that its purpose is exclusively to safeguard the interests of the individuals; the other, that the state is prior logically to the individuals, either because it exists of divine right, or because it is the whole, the thing, of which individual citizens are merely the parts, as cells of a physical organism, and that its purpose is therefore its own evolution, to the service of which the individual citizens are to be exclusively devoted.

To see how these types of theory came to be formulated, it is necessary to recall the evolution of thought which took place at the time of the Reformation. Until then, the subordination of politics and economics to theology had been taken, at least in theory, as axiomatic. But it was not long before a dichotomy became established in fact and justified in theory. Luther taught that to externalize religion meant to degrade it; calvinism, in spite of Calvin's own doctrine of the omniscient Church, developed along individualistic lines, and in its puritan form taught the sanctity of good business; Catholic morals were soon to be immersed in internecine struggles between tutorists and probabilists, and were unequal to the task of coping with new developments in science and worldly affairs. The physical sciences threw off

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the yoke of dualist metaphysics; the wave of scientific discovery led to developments which left scholasticism high and very dry in its strongholds; and it was this atmosphere of autonomy and materialism which the philosophers of the new age imbibed. Hence, in the sphere of political philosophy, though there was material continuity, there was a new spirit, a new underlying metaphysic. This is obvious in Hobbes, who, though unhappily for the tidiness of things he does not fit neatly into either of the two types mentioned above, is at the head of a long tradition of political theory which developed in ways antagonistic to his own prepossessions but owed a great deal to his assumptions. Hobbes adapted the theory of a social contract, itself as old as Epicurus, to his own needs: the primitive state of nature is nasty, brutish and short, and men in it are in danger of their lives; they agree therefore to resign their rights into the hands of the sovereign; henceforward all the laws of nature, all duties and rights, are such only because the sovereign has decreed that they shall be so. Thus totalitarianism is first expounded in England. Hobbes twisted his theory into conformity with the doctrine of divine right; Locke, whose uneasy office it was to whitewash and justify the achieved exploits of whiggery, changed it round so as to propound the theory of the joint-stock-company state, as Tawney put it, "in which the liabilities of the share-holders are strictly limited": the absolutism of the sovereign gives way to the absolutism of the individual. Rousseau, for his part, reacting against jansenist pessimism, and viewing the state of nature in terms of the garden of Eden—he was, as somebody has put it, a firm believer in his own immaculate conception—evolved his mystical theory of political pantheism, centred in the myth of the general will (which has suspicious analogies with the averroist universal active intellect), and used the contract theory to prove that the individual, *se donnant à tous, ne se donne à personne*, a view of things which not unnaturally led to his becoming the father of both absolutist and libertarian theories of politics—to say nothing of the French romantics. We in this country, though the

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contract theory was de-bunked by Hume, and later theorizing pursued a different path, have inherited much of its spirit. Its principle of non-interference, in alliance with the laissez-faire atmosphere of classical economics, produced the liberal-individualist tradition in which we to a great extent live and put our faith, to such an extent indeed that the considerable encroachments upon individual liberty which have been made in more recent times have had to be carried through *sub rosa* and in the warm effulgence produced by a stirring enunciation of democratic principles. And it is the liberal-individualist theory which, by way of whiggery, has left us partly at least in the hands of an oligarchic plutocracy which is largely responsible both for the evils under which we labour and for the flight from democracy which we are witnessing to-day on every hand.

If James II had not been overthrown, as Disraeli remarked in *Sybil*, (and "the English people had no part in his overthrow"), we "might have been saved the triple blessings of Venetian politics, Dutch finance, and French wars"; and later in the same book he speaks of "that monstrous conception which even patrician Rome in its most ruthless period never equalled, the mortgaging of the industry of the country to enrich and to protect property," i.e., capital, "an act which is now bringing its retributive consequences on a degraded and alienated population." It is important to remember that liberal-individualism may, and probably will, involve the abrogation of sovereignty into the hands of money, partly because of its importance in assessing the sound elements in theories opposed to individualism, and more fundamentally because of its importance in the whole question of function in political society, from which the thomist theory begins.

In direct opposition to the bulk of the contract theories and their descendants stand the absolutist theories with the birth of which, in their modern form, the name of Hegel is connected. To-day the hegelian theory is of importance mainly because Marx turned it inside out and elaborated the theory with which we are familiar: the dialectic of thesis

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and antithesis and synthesis is preserved, but explained in terms of material instead of ideal evolution—in a deeper sense it is in this respect the turning inside out of the Christian philosophy of history, for the temporal process is seen as the evolution not of a created logos into ultimate conformity with the divine, but of the precise opposite of logos, matter, in conformity with its own blind force. But whether ideal or material dialectic, the place of the individual is the same: every man is equally a cog in the system, without rights because without any end other than that of the system itself. It is worth noticing that the inability to fit Hobbes into either type of theory is here most apparent. For in one way there is a very close likeness between the communist state and the hobbesian Leviathan: the same explanation of reality, of the process of cosmic becoming, in terms of “matter of motion”; the same absolutism, the same indivisible and infallible sovereign, the same worship of force, the same refusal to admit the existence of claims other than the strictly material advancement of the State. In fact, however, the contract theories evolved along different lines; for indeed, the contract itself, being admittedly no more than a juridical fiction, is relatively unimportant; and the contrast between opposing theories is best expressed in terms of the function which they assign to the State.

The formulation of this contrast is simple enough. The State as such is, of course, in the marxist scheme, expected simply to hasten the process towards the classless society by liquidating all but one of the classes, after which achievement it should wither away, its usefulness at an end. Political theory, in any case, regards rather the collectivity which should then emerge; and here its functions need no elaborating: the production of endless material wealth for the formation of a material paradise in which each receives according to his needs, having worked according to his capacities; to the end that, not the individual primarily, but the collectivity, may arrive at the materialist millenium. The opposite school is not patient of such simple definition. At times it has advocated mere negative non-interference;

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Bosanquet expressed its function in terms of the hindering of hindrances to the good life of the individual; MacIver gives it a double function: the positive one of forming and sustaining the social order within which man can work out his own fulfilment, and the negative one of respecting personality, from which follow as conclusions that the State should not seek to control opinion; that that living culture which is the expression of the spirit of a people is outside State competence; and that the State may concern itself with associations such as family and Church only in so far as they have a political bearing. There is thus, within the liberalist or democratic camp a sufficient latitude; but the point for the moment is that it is the individual who is of first importance, and that the State's whole function is expressed exclusively in serving the individual.

From these ideas ought to follow a clear-cut distinction as to centralization and autonomy. That this is not the case is due to the fact, already mentioned, that the liberal state has in point of fact succeeded in encroaching upon individual liberty. For logically the individualist regime ought to be that in which the fullest measure of autonomy is assured to the individual and to the small group; and that this is not so would seem to be largely the consequence of the abrogation of sovereignty into the control of money, to whose nefarious purposes centralization is of course essential, for monopoly means centralization.

A similar difficulty confronts us on the subject of forms of government. The contract theory, employed as for the most part it was in the service of the individual, was naturally all out for democracy; yet the most cursory glance at, let us say, the effects of the Reform Bill, the present powers of the Cabinet, the relation between money and democratic government, should be sufficient to disquiet anyone liable to think of our regime as pure democracy. And on the other hand, of course, Stalin, who by rights other than divine should be the inevitable personification of the people, who for their part should follow blindly where he leads, lamentably queers the spectator's pitch by carrying out an

election, however farcical it may in fact have been. What is more important than these difficulties of fact, however, is the theoretical problem. The government of all by all is of course as chimerical in politics as it is in economics; the sovereignty must be vested, somehow, in somebody; the problem is how and in whom. And the logical contrast must then surely be between parliamentarianism on the one hand and some form of dictatorship on the other. True, Spengler held that as we had passed, like all other cultures, from god-emperors to monarcho-feudalism and thence to oligarchy (parliamentary or bourgeois-feudalism), so we should pass through a period of caesarism before plunging into the final collapse; and there are signs that this contention is not as wide of the mark as it seemed when it was made; but if it is to be verified, this only means that the absolutist theory will have conquered the individualist; and that lugubrious moment in our evolution will matter little once we have reached the final collapse.

To turn now to the remaining theory, which, like Hobbes, is not wholly in either camp, at least in its origins and intentions. The confusion arises from the fact that the fascist and nazi regimes sprang, as *Mein Kampf* and Mussolini's autobiography sufficiently show, from reaction to both Communism and liberalist individualism viewed as being a single ethos; while they have themselves evolved on the lines of totalitarianism and force. This means that, while from their point of view, and in the light of their genesis, they stand on one side facing the communist and liberalist theories in juxtaposition on the other; looked at in what appears to be one at least of their essentials now, they stand with Communism and opposed to Liberalism. In other words, if we are not to strain facts for the sake of achieving neatness in theorizing, these systems must be regarded as a mixture of the two opposing types of theory hitherto considered.

Two distinct elements, then, are present in the fascist theories. There is first the antagonism to the money power, and to Liberalism (the regime which does nothing to curb

the money power). This element has found expression in the theory of the corporate state in Italy, and in the state control of finance in the Reich. Secondly, the fascist method is the method of violence: the fascist view of the state is totalitarian, and this, it would seem, necessarily implies, and is therefore the cause of, violence. It is important to distinguish these two elements, even though they be in fact inseparable in these regimes, because a Christian conception of the state will necessarily involve the one and equally necessarily exclude the other.

But now, from the point of view of the function assigned to the state, the fascist regimes will clearly belong rather to the absolutist than to the liberal theories; and there, while not forgetting their dual character, we may for the moment leave them.

Before turning to the thomist conception of the state, there are two other points which must be mentioned. First, there is the question of international relations. Here it is as well to leave Russia out of count; for it would seem that its international activity is twofold: as one of the Powers it tends to be aligned with the democracies and against the dictators; as the centre of international Communism it has another role, it would seem, *vis-à-vis* the democracies; and into the labyrinthine ways of the Communist International we cannot here venture. For the rest, the absolutist states take their stand on a forthright nationalism which looks to economic autonomy as its goal, to the grave inconvenience of those who hold that the world is naturally and supernaturally destined to be, and materially is in fact already, a unity; while on the other hand the democracies, clinging to some extent to the theory of international economic freedom, lay themselves open to the charge of playing into the hands of international finance, which is regarded by its opponents as the enemy of all nations alike. There is here an apparent impasse, which must be overcome if the world is to survive; so that the importance of this problem cannot be overestimated.

The second point to be noticed is this: that in both camps

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hitherto considered there is one important common factor. They are both the heritage in different ways of the post-Reformation mentality: they are, in other words, the inheritors of the postulate with which modern science began, and with which modern philosophy so quickly came into alignment: the divorce of religion from mundane affairs, and the consequent competence of human reason and science to think things out for themselves, and arrange the material of life in terms of material benefit, without reference to any higher criterion.

For the elements of the thomist theory we must turn first to Aristotle. Man is by nature a social animal, because by nature he is not self-sufficient in the business of living; political society, therefore, began as a necessary condition of life, and continued as a necessary condition of the good life, and its purpose is thus the most comprehensive good of its members, who, having the possession of private property (without which concord and friendship are impossible) yet hold the use of it in common, and, giving each his own particular contribution to the common good, receive from the community the necessary material conditions for the supreme purpose of life, the contemplation of truth.

On this basis St. Thomas began his theory. He had of course to incorporate the Aristotelean principles into a larger synthesis: the earthly destiny of man is ultimately determined by reference to his eternal destiny. While, then, for him as for Aristotle, economics is subordinate to politics, the pursuit of wealth controlled by reference to the greater ends of society, for St. Thomas the whole political structure is dependent on theology. This does not mean mere partisanship in the struggle between Pope and Emperor, as Pollock tried to make out; nor does it mean the *civilisation sacrale* of which the Holy Roman Empire was in theory the expression. But it does mean that economic and political expediency are to be ruled by the ethical absolutes which theology teaches; and it means moreover, since the hobbesian pessimism is by anticipation denied, that the primary end of society is not negative defence of life and

property but positive promotion of the good life. It means something more. It is of the essence of the thomist theory of man that the individual is not only not self-sufficient in the business of living, whether on the physical or the spiritual plane, but also that his perfection, no matter what his way of life, is always essentially in self-transcendence. He can find happiness, as it is his destiny to do, only by serving something other and greater than himself: ultimately God, and mediately the many secondary ends which are his path to God—family, friends, ideals, and the common good of political society. Immediately then he is seen to stand in a double relation to the society of which he is a member: society is for the individual, the individual is for society. On final analysis, as the present Pope has emphasized, society is for man, and not vice versa; but he warns us that this is not to be understood in the sense of liberalist individualism, “but only in the sense that by means of an organic union with society and by mutual collaboration the attainment of earthly happiness is placed within the reach of all.” For, while society is the means of making the individual happy, the individual in fact achieves happiness only in so far as he aims at the happiness of others. It follows, then, if we turn to the next point, the limits of state action, that first of all there are areas of life with which the state, as a purely mundane power, can have no competence to deal: all the areas in which a man is concerned directly with God and with spiritual values. In this sense we may agree with MacIver, that the state’s business is to respect personality, and that it cannot interfere with family, Church, culture, opinion, except in so far as these overlap with politics—hence the necessity of concordats; but we must go further, and demand, if we are speaking of the ideal, that it should positively accept the higher ruling of theology in regard to the relation of policy to ultimates, and that it should actively foster, rather than negatively not interfere with, the perfect exercise of these personal rights. But now, when we have thus marked out the limits of its competence, the relation of individual to society remains a changing one.

The individual is bound to work for the common good; but the common good is one thing in time of tranquillity and concord, and another in times of crisis. The duty of the individual towards the state will make greater or less demands upon him as the good of all is endangered or prosperous; yet however the application of principle vary, the principle itself remains firm: that the individual finds his happiness in working for the common good in the things that concern temporal well-being. If we are thinking of the nation, this last statement will have to be modified, as we shall see; but we may leave it for the moment in order to add a rider. For if we think of human society not in terms of political activity in the strictly mundane sense, but as the society of individuals with eternal destinies, then we must enlarge the idea of service of the common good. For just as the worship, and the growth of virtue, of husband and wife are, in the Christian scheme, not the worship and the growth of two individuals merely but of one entity, the family; so the worship and growth of the whole of human society are, ideally, the worship and growth of a unity, the Body of Christ; and this means a much deeper conception of the individual's duties to society.

What of the thomist view of the form of government? St. Thomas agrees with Aristotle that all like and uphold an order in which they have played a part. There is more than a merely pragmatic realism in this. Because the social sciences are not physical sciences, because there is no such thing as the *homo politicus* any more than there is such a thing as Adam Smith's *homo æconomicus*, because in other words man is a person with free-will, we cannot acquiesce in a system of government which gives him no say at all in matters which so closely affect his happiness and destiny. It is worth noting that the contract theory, though denied in so far as it purports to offer a full explanation of the origin of the state, is incorporated in part in the thomist view, since, while the existence of political society and therefore of sovereignty is held to be of natural law, the fact that the sovereignty is vested in this or that form of government is

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often held to be the result of a *pactum saltem implicitum*, an at least implicit contract. This is to be understood as a logical rather than a temporal priority; the actual historical origins of a state are usually obscure, and often will not bear investigation: they are in any case irrelevant. What follows from this view as a statement of logical analysis of rights is that the citizen has, first, the right to regard his citizenship as an exercise of his freedom; secondly, therefore, the right to play some part, according to his powers, in the governing of his country; and thirdly, it may be added, has the duty of serving the common good in this way as in others. The operative words are here, surely, "according to his powers." An irresponsible electorate, party politics, equality of function, class legislation, these things are not deducible from the natural law. Still less is the chimera of government of all by all. Functional representation is what seems to be pointed to, perhaps parallel, as in Portugal, with a national assembly; St. Thomas for his part holds that monarchy is indicated, since unless the power is in the hands of one there will be no unity; that this monarchy should be checked, however; that working under it there should be an aristocracy (which is not necessarily hereditary); and that the democratic element should be present by way of the facilities given to the citizen to express his views and to elect his representatives. We may add to this Disraeli's dictum that if we wish to avoid class legislation the only way is to entrust the power to one who stands outside all class interests. There is of course no fool-proof recipe for government, for men are men, from whichever side of Suez they may come; and moreover politics, in any case, like ethics, is not an exact science, and the application of principle necessarily differs in different times and places and cultures. But in general, some such theory as this seems to give most hope of avoiding the evils of both dictatorships and individualisms, while at the same time synthesizing their advantages: for the principle of authority, necessary to unity, is both guaranteed and checked, the principle of individual autonomy is made intelligent by

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interpretation in terms of function and, in particular, on the one hand, class warfare is avoided not by chimerical attempts at a classless society but by ensuring co-operation between classes; and on the other, this co-operation itself is made possible by the control of finance, for, as Dawson has pointed out, it is when men are regarded in liberal-democratic terms of absolute equality, and society viewed simply as an aggregate of identical units, that the individual is in fact left at the mercy of economic forces.

This brings us to the question of autonomy and centralization. In the first place, Thomism stands, by reason of its principles, for local autonomy in politics as it stands for small ownership in economics, but in harmony with race or culture factors on the one hand and the growth of the world's material and economic unity on the other. More definitely, it will be for the local autonomy of the village or town or district in affairs of local interest and where centralized control is not absolutely necessary for the primary interests of the society as a whole; it will be for self-determination of larger groups where race or culture mark them off as autonomous units. On the other hand, the citizen is, in the thomist view, a citizen not only of his home town and his fatherland but of the world; and the hard facts of material development make this view more than an idealist vision. We have reached the stage at which unless we have some measure of world-centralization we shall perish.

Now the issue between nationalism and internationalism often presents itself in terms of a dilemma: either internationalism which means the victory of international finance, or nationalism which means jealousies, conflict, wars. This dilemma is reflected in Catholic writers and publicists; for some, regarding finance as the villain of the piece, are inclined to pin their allegiance forthwith to nationalism, while others with the law of international unity and justice foremost in their minds, offer no solution to the difficulties and dangers which nationalism sets out to counter. There is, in fact, surely, no dilemma, for there is a third possibility. Just as it is possible to control finance

within the nation without either abrogating the rights of the person or concentrating power in a regime of tyranny, so it is possible in the world as a whole to have internationalism without cosmopolitanism, to control finance for the common good of the world as a whole. Hence the necessity of a universal League, or something approximating to it.

We may now attempt to summarize the thomist position in the light of the theories previously discussed. There are five points to be noted:

(1) where individualism asserts personality to the neglect of individual duties, and absolutism asserts the concept of the common good to the neglect of personal rights, Thomism stands for the rights of the person, but holds that these rights are fulfilled only through service of the common good;

(2) where liberal democracy asserts individual autonomy at the expense of authority legislating for the common good, and absolutism elevates authority to the extinction of personal freedom, Thomism withdraws some areas of life altogether from the secular power, lays the secular power itself under obedience to theological principles, demands de-centralization of control in some matters and adequate representation of opinion in the rest, but safeguards unity and control of class interests by the monarchical principle;

(3) where individualism gives the State the exclusively negative role of non-interference and so plays into the hands of the money power, and nationalism, controlling economics, denies international duties and makes for hatred and war, Thomism would control money for the good of the nations as a whole;

(4) where individualism uses the contract theory to deny the natural foundations of citizenship, and absolutism by denying the contract destroys the rational foundations of citizenship, the thomist distinction safeguards both;

(5) where individualism leads, through the policy of *laissez-faire*, to class warfare, and absolutism leads, through the policy of violence, to class extinction, Thomism harnesses all classes in a unified effort to achieve the good of all.

These distinctions, and the synthesis which they embody, are more than a theoretic and academic attempt at logical neatness. The truth is realized only through the synthesis of its partial manifestations. It is easy to be insular and partisan about these things. "The Anglo-Saxon," Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch has noted, ". . . ever left an empty

space around his house; and that, no doubt, is good for a house. It is not so good for the mind." We cannot afford to allow awareness of the sound elements in one theory to obscure those in another, nor a recognition of what is right in a theory to obscure what in the same theory is wrong. But in fact it is as difficult to achieve a complete and objective view of anything as it is easy to fall into a partial and biassed one. And the complete view is a synthesis *ex alto*: it starts from a plane which at best is apt to be ignored and at worst denied by thesis and antithesis—which is the ultimate reason, in the present context, why we cannot wholly acquiesce in either the individualist or the totalitarian systems. It is imperative then that we sort out our fundamental ideas. The human race will doubtless continue to stand in the rain; it is a sobering thought that as Christians we are debarred from copying Plato's wise man and staying by our firesides even if we wished to, while on the other hand we can hardly be so sanguine as to suppose that the rain will cease the moment we step outside. There will always be many things which, in the concluding words of *Utopia*, "we maye rather wishe for, than hope after"; but at least it is a good thing to know first of all precisely after what we ought to hope. For, to borrow a sturdy metaphor from More's translator, "the hastye bitche bringeth furth blind whelpes."

GERALD VANN, O.P.

PERE LAGRANGE

The memoir of Père Lagrange, promised in our last issue, has been delayed; but our readers will agree that the reason for this delay is eminently satisfactory. We have been fortunate enough to secure the promise of a memoir from the one person most qualified in every way to write it, namely the Very Rev. Père Vincent, O.P., a valued disciple of Père Lagrange, as well as his successor in the government of St. Etienne in Jerusalem. We feel entirely justified, therefore, in asking our readers to agree to the unavoidable delay attaching to the preparation of this important memoir.

—THE EDITOR.