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Aquinas As A Political Theorist

W. Kenneth Howard

That perennial controversy over the role of “normative” theory in social science has apparently abated somewhat, however it is just such occasions as these that send academic political scientists wringing their hands. The work of St. Thomas is hardly considered to increase our knowledge of political phenomena; he was after all a friar, hardly a political man; and he wrote philosophy. That latter charge is meant as the clincher. What could he possibly contribute toward an understanding of the political?

The question is fair enough; and here I propose an analysis of his only explicit political work, *On Kingship*. In our own present high period of political monarchy, perhaps it would also be worthwhile to investigate one man’s conception of and arguments for kingship as the “right” form of government. Apparently, we have got to learn to live with it.

I realize that it may be somewhat unfair to St. Thomas to attribute *On Kingship* to him. He did write it but never edited it, and neglected even to send it to its intended receiver, an unknown King of Cyprus. Moreover, it is clear that in subsequent writings which no doubt Aquinas intended to claim, some of these earlier positions were amended. Whether or not St. Thomas wished to stand by *On Kingship* is difficult to say. I suppose we could claim, “well he wrote it, so much the worse for him” and I must admit that after a week of praising Caesar it just might be fun to needle him; but this would hardly be as interesting as looking at his argument for monarchy itself. And it is his model of monarchical government that promises some insight on politics. I am most interested to see if St. Thomas was indeed a political theorist.

In Chapter nine of Book one, Aquinas summarizes the position of the king. He writes,

The greatness of kingly virtue also appears in this, that he bears a special likeness to God, since he does in his kingdom what God does in his world
...¹

And the metaphor he relies upon to clarify this “doing” by both God and the proper king, is a ship

A ship, for example, which moves in different directions according to the impulse of the changing winds, would never reach its destination were it not brought to port by the skill of the pilot.²

And, if you will permit me one more reference,

Thus a ship is said to be governed where, through the skill of the pilot, it is brought unharmed and by a direct route to harbour.³

Now it seems crucial to assess whether St. Thomas is speaking metaphorically here or analogously. Did he use the term "ship" as simply a conventional device to convey the need, in his specific historical period, for some strong organizing principle within the polity? Or, did he mean that the ship was like the polity in all politically relevant respects? Much hinges on the answer to this question. For if he intended to convey that there is very much a "ship of state" with a king at the helm, and that analogously we must understand politics by remembering perilous seas, buffeting winds and our home port, the equivocation will not hold. Political life is not a voyage.

His argument for a king is deceptively simple, almost seductive. Summarized, and at times paraphrased, it comes to this:

1. Since in all things directed toward something, a principle is needed to effect this end in the most efficacious way;
2. so too with men, whose reason and intelligence indicate they act for ends;
3. but who obviously conflict in the manner in which they act for their end;
4. need some directive principle to guide them toward this common end.

Now the above is intended to be an excerpt from our general natural knowledge of things. It is a teleological description of nature. Applied specifically to public life, the argument continues,

5. Because men are by nature social, they must live together.
6. Living together necessitates some means of government.

And applied to the form of government, St. Thomas concludes,

7. Since the purpose of government is unity or peace,
8. the most efficacious method of securing the unity of peace is the undisputed leadership of one man.
9. Moreover, those things which imitate nature are preferred, and in nature governance is "done" by one.
10. Finally, those polities "enjoy(ing) peace, flourish(ing) in justice, and delight(ing) in prosperity" are ruled by kings.

The exposition is complete. Kings may count upon rational, natural and historical justifications to support their office. All hatches seem battened down.

Now laid out in propositional form, and I believe I have done so accurately, the problems inherent in Aquinas' argument for monarchy seem rather obvious; in fact,

almost embarrassing. Only (5) and (6) are uncontroversial, and that because they are apparent and even banal. Upon closer look, his argument breaks down to a program. St. Thomas is not demonstrating the political necessity for kingship, after all he is writing to a king who, presumably, did not need to be convinced of his position, but rather is rationalizing his preference for one type of political organization. My point can be made by reviewing Aquinas' steps.

The first point is the key to St. Thomas' ontology; and as such is beyond my competence and the scope of this paper. I am willing to let it stand with only noticing what has often been demonstrated before: it elides the important distinction between description and prescription, and does so without even admitting of the distinction. It does get St. Thomas into a great deal of difficulty philosophically, even if we admit he is primarily interested in an analysis of the way we verbalize and communicate experience. But politically, it begins to set up an organizational paradigm of imposition.

The second and third steps are simply invalid: he attempts to apply evidence of personal goals to an argument for guidance to an undemonstrated common goal. The conclusion in (4) is unsubstantiated and necessarily so. For Aquinas has deftly shifted the terms of his argument from the principles of reality to the behavior of men.

As I have already mentioned (5) and (6) are uncontested. But the revealing move, the politically critical move comes in (7). Stating that the singular purpose of government is the unity of peace is a bald preference. It is the attempt to effect a correspondence in the organization of men's public affairs with (1); without qualification, without consideration of the possibility of two distinct conceptual realms. The subsequent justifications for kingship, (8), (9) and (10), are grounded in the unexplained transference of a *reason* for political organization, (6), to his posited end of politics itself, (7). St. Thomas has shown that a manner of political governance is necessary he has not demonstrated the validity of any particular form of that rule.

Of course we may wonder whether such an exposition as Aquinas has laid out could ever argue to a particular form. Politics is not delivered by logic; it seems to be that he has a hidden agenda.

Although St. Thomas alludes to politics as an art, the references blur a distinction between working with nature or building upon nature, and imitating nature. He variously writes,

Wherefore, if artificial things are an imitation of natural things and a work of art is better according as it attains a closer likeness to what is in nature . . .⁴

He (the king) has to make use of those which already exist in nature, just as the other arts derive the material for their work from nature . . .⁵

. . . for civil life presupposes natural life . . .⁶

Ultimately however, the imitative aspect of art predominates. Monarchy is that which most closely approximates the unitary directive principles of God in the universe, the soul in the body, and reason within the soul. He concludes,

Therefore let the king recognize that such is the office which he undertakes, namely, that he is to be in the kingdom what the soul is in the body, and what God is in the world.⁷

Now it seems to me that Aquinas' problem, precisely put, is what kind of an argument *could* infer such a kingly office. And the problem is one he has stipulated himself. For the knowledge of these unitary directive principles is a universal natural knowledge, known only in a general way through reflection on experience.⁸ They are unelaborated, reasoned conclusions. Kingship, on the other hand, is a specific form of political structure; it is not generated or delivered by reflection on public life, rather it is a purposive attempt to direct what is found to be unordered, often chaotic, and of necessity in need of organization. Aquinas recognizes as much when he acknowledges that in preserving the unity of peace, the king must deal with "the perversity of the wills of men" which continually challenges the peace of the commonwealth.

There is more involved here than a logical error. St. Thomas excludes considerations of politics as an activity because he is primarily interested in only one of its goals, unity of peace; or I think as we would say today, a stable community. This overriding commitment to a purpose, what I have already referred to as his hidden agenda, delivers his specific form of political organization, not any investigation into what public life is but what it should be. Kingship, then, has not been reasoned for, it has been deduced. The polity *should be* like a ship in all relevant respects.

Before I comment on what appears to me to be blatantly false with such an analogy, let me try to uncover why St. Thomas might so unabashedly draw it.

What I have claimed so far is that Aquinas converted purposive political activity into directed activity for a purpose. And he did so for that goal, so familiar to medievalists, the "common good." This conversion was rather inarticulate but deliberate, and was legitimized by Aquinas' equivocating on the word "good." The common good of his particular political vision is a preferred moral state of public affairs. For St. Thomas, the political is merely one aspect of the overriding moral paradigm; the conduct of public affairs is related to moral life directly. Political society may be a "perfect" society, in the sense that it provides within itself for all of the necessities of life of its citizens; but it can not be a separate society, distinct and devoted to peculiarly political concerns. In fact it would be fair to say that for him there were no peculiar political concerns.

This conception of public life elucidates his insistency on monarchy more than any argument could. His arguments for kingship are faulty because they never were intended to bear the full weight of conviction. Kingship was endorsed because it

could most reasonably be expected, when it worked well, to insure the practical extension of a pre-ordained moral paradigm. There were "goods" to be established and preserved in civil society, and kingship was the most "natural" vehicle for doing so. He wrote,

In all things, good ensues,
from one perfect cause, *i.e.*
from the totality of the
conditions favorable to the
production of the effect,
while evil results from any
one partial defect. . . . It is
thus with all good and evil
things, as if God so provided
that good, arising from one
cause, be stronger, and evil,
arising from many causes, be
weaker. It is expedient there-
fore that a just government be
that of one man only in order
that it may be stronger . . .⁹

Only here could we say that Aquinas' analogy of a king with the pilot of a ship breaks down, because finally it does not go far enough. Related to moral life directly, the king is to do more than govern the polity, he is to "restrain the men subject to him from wickedness and induce them to virtuous deeds."¹⁰

Without having to explore the hazardous shoals of "inducing" men to virtue, we can stipulate that St. Thomas did indeed intend that political life be analogous to a ship at sea, to a moral voyage. The king would direct the common good in the "right" way.

With such a scheme of civil society, there is a noticeable absence in St. Thomas of any serious considerations of the lot of citizens. They are there, of course, but in strange and disparate references: either as somewhat volatile and politically unpredictable, and so as additional reasons for the establishment of a just monarchy; or as politically disinterested, anxious to love and obey their kings. This last reference is most revealing. What civic friendship there exists within Aquinas' polity, does so between the ruler and the ruled, not among the ruled themselves. Man as a social animal needs the community of his fellows; apparently political man does not.

In fact there are throughout this treatise hints that while St. Thomas distinguishes between the social and political order, and thereby resurrects the political domain from historical obscurity in the Middle Ages (no mean feat indeed), he does so with the intention of preserving social life, that is, of enhancing individual transactions

for the necessities of life.¹¹ He is interested in men not in citizens; and where he acknowledges eminently political problems, namely insurgency and regicide, he counsels toleration,¹² and suggests revolutionaries are presumptuous, irrational, and of bad faith.¹³ Nor is there any indication that in his more mature works, Aquinas modified this stand.¹⁴

The point here is that he has bungled the job. Distinctly political problems have been overlooked or swept under the moral rug. If they are recognized at all, it has been in an offhand way, with the admonition, "Should no human aid whatsoever against a tyrant be forthcoming, recourse must be had to God . . ."¹⁵ for ". . . it is by divine permission that wicked men receive power to rule as a punishment for sin."¹⁶ These are rationalizations not reasons for foreclosing on the political.

Obviously, my conclusion is that he is not a political theorist at all; at least the author of *On Kingship* is not a political theorist. But that is not to say that St. Thomas has not illuminated politics for us. I think he most certainly has. Because the political problems he misses increasingly nag us, St. Thomas has unintentionally disclosed a destructive political fallacy, that of objectifying the state. In speaking of the polity in terms larger than its citizens, or in terms that exclude their participation, he has described a completion, a terminated act. Or, what comes to the same thing, in insisting upon a meaning, one meaning to public life, he has robbed it of any meaning at all. When Aquinas finishes with his comments on *Kingship*, the "ship of state" remains above all a ship; and a rather tight ship at that. A king for St. Thomas is he, who for the best of reasons, stifles political life. The stress I want to make in this last sentence is on "for the best of reasons."

One immediate objection to these uncomplimentary remarks is that one must consider the historical context in which he wrote. After all could we expect a liberal democrat in the thirteenth century? I am afraid my answer is yes, if what we mean by a liberal democrat is one who values individual choice and its expression. And St. Thomas most certainly did. His whole moral theory is grounded on the reasons for certain choices, on the responsibility to choose. Any moral theory must be. What he has done however is used this moral paradigm to eliminate politics, to refuse political choice. Under the historical influences of his time, Aquinas wrote *On Kingship* as a statement on public life in general. He has delivered an enduring answer as the questions come and go. However he has missed the point that political life also is choice and change. Political life as well as moral life occurs when men are able to act, and this implies free men; men permitted to make up their own minds.

Nor is he simply a conservative, preserving a certain medieval tradition and distrusting the ambitions of men. The various "ends" of which Aquinas speaks are moral necessities because they were considered to be natural. Whether or not these are permissible conclusions in morals, there are no corresponding boundaries in politics. Politics is the most artificial of enterprises. What appears as indubitable or given, and for St. Thomas this must have been imminent public conflict, is perceived by a point of view that is itself conventional. Our perception of political

reality and our corresponding activity in regards to it are reciprocally related, developed through the traditions and language of a people. We do politics as we do morals—cumulatively. And to do politics as to do morals there must be some personal space to reflect and debate, to challenge and even change these perceptual conventions themselves. Aquinas smothered us with the natural truth, and consequently no political activity is possible. In pursuit of one political goal, the common good, he has terminated a process in which politics makes sense. He charts the political world without recognizing that the goals of politics deal with the process not the end. Politics is living together, but as free men or we would be incapable of being moral either. In answering the question why should one man be set over all others in a given polity, St. Thomas has torn the concept of political authority from any of its moorings in the contexts of speech or history and extrapolated it to infinity. We are left with an organizing principle without any organization to which it might apply. Consequently he has not addressed political authority at all.

Political life is tenuous; St. Thomas has attempted to make it secure. He has interpreted order in the universe and it has led to an imposed order in the polity. Contrary to those political scientists who would disdain any preoccupation with long deceased philosophers, I consider his political mistakes intriguing and crucial. He forces us to reexamine our own political images. And he teaches us to be diligent in selecting those events we wish politically to respond to, for the consequences may be worse than the facts themselves. Perennially there are “good reasons” for preempting political choice, for making public life unbearable; St. Thomas has illuminated how enticing those reasons may be.

The claim that for St. Thomas a moral paradigm overrode the political is a claim that he could not distinguish between moral and political discourse. It is a common enough error, even if one's moral pilots are Aquinas, Kant or Marx. However, in an attempt to create ties of obligation to bring men together it ultimately destroys any creative initiative of which that polity could be capable.

Nature was a model for Aquinas but he neglected to ask if it could exhaust the ways in which citizens might want to act in order to change their world. Political discourse is precisely deliberation over what shall we do with our interpretations of nature, of our natural capabilities; and how shall we do it. It is not an interpretation of what we or anyone else (God?) has done. In choosing the analogy of a ship, Aquinas restricted public life to a moral rule, but politics is public action and the nature of any organizing principle is part of the dispute itself. His king may be rational, or natural, or efficient, but he is illegitimate. The need for him has not grown out of public life but from a moral conclusion. And there is nothing political about that.

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NOTES

- ¹ *On Kingship*, I, IX, 72. Hereafter referred to as *O.K.*
- ² *Ibid.*, I, I, 3.
- ³ *Ibid.*, II, III, 103.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, I, II, 19.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, II, II, 100.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, II, VI, 129.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, II, I, 95.
- ⁸ Man, on the contrary, has a natural knowledge of the things which are essential for his life only in a general fashion, insomuch as he is able to attain knowledge of the particular things necessary for human life by reasoning from natural principles. *O.K.*, I, I, 6.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, I, III, 25.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II, IV, 120.
- ¹¹ Now the welfare and safety of a multitude formed into a society lies in the preservation of its unity, which is called peace. If this is removed the benefit of social life is lost and, moreover, the multitude in its disagreement becomes a burden to itself. The chief concern of the ruler of a multitude therefore, is to procure the unity of peace. *O.K.*, I, II, 17.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, I, VI, 44.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, I, VI, 46-50.
- ¹⁴ See John O. Riedl, "Thomas Aquinas on Citizenship," *The American Catholic Philosophical Association: Proceeding for the Year of 1963*, 159-167.
- ¹⁵ *O.K.*, I, VI, 51.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, VI, 52.