THE HUMAN PERSON AND POLITICAL LIFE

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I wish to discuss the relationship between the human person and political life. My remarks will be a venture into political philosophy. This branch of philosophy has been short-changed in Catholic philosophy in the past century, during the Thomistic revival following the encyclical Aeterni Patris of Pope Leo XIII in 1879.

In the departmental structure and the philosophical curricula that prevailed in many Catholic colleges and universities during the first two thirds of the twentieth century, political philosophy would usually be located not in philosophy departments but in political science. In seminary programs, there was effectively no political philosophy whatsoever. The philosophy manuals of the early and middle part of the century covered political philosophy, if they treated it at all, as a division of ethics. In the great manual written by Joseph Gredt, O.S.B., for example, entitled Elementa philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae, one finds extensive treatments of logic, epistemology, philosophy of nature, philosophical psychology, metaphysics, theodicy, and ethics, but in the nearly one thousand pages of the two volumes, there are only some

1 An earlier draft of this paper was presented at a symposium that both honored Pope John Paul II and marked the university career of Jude P. Dougherty, Dean Emeritus of the School of Philosophy, The Catholic University of America. The symposium was held on November 17–18, 2000, and was sponsored by the School of Philosophy and the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center.
twenty pages, at the very end of the second volume, devoted to "civil society," and this brief section terminates with a two-page treatment de bello, on war. This long philosophical work, therefore, does not end peacefully, and it clearly does not offer a solution to the political problem.

It is true that some of the most important twentieth-century Catholic philosophers devoted much of their work to political philosophy: Jacques Maritain wrote such books as Man and the State, The Person and the Common Good, Things that are Not Caesar's, Integral Humanism, Freedom in the Modern World (the French title was Du régime temporel et de la liberté), and Scholasticism and Politics (Principes d'une politique humaniste), all of which deal with politics, and Yves R. Simon wrote The Philosophy of Democratic Government among other titles in political thought, but these two authors were the exception rather than the rule. At Louvain's Higher Institute for Philosophy, for example, there was no representation of political philosophy. Jacques LeClercq wrote in social ethics and social philosophy, but not in political thought as such. What was done in political philosophy added up to a relatively small achievement in this field, compared, say, with the work that was done in metaphysics, philosophy of science, ethics, and the philosophy of man. This lack of interest is rather strange, since political life originally provided the context for philosophy, in the life of Socrates and in the writings of both Plato and Aristotle. The lack of concern with political philosophy should provoke our curiosity and perhaps even our wonder.

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, a particularly impressive group of Catholic thinkers in Paris has addressed issues in political philosophy. Pierre Manent is the most conspicuous of these, but one must also mention Remi Brague, Alain Besançon, and Terence Marshall. Their work has been influenced by Raymond Aron and Leo Strauss. We should also call to mind the work, in the United States, of Ernest Fortin, A. A. (Boston College), James Schall, S. J. (Georgetown), Francis Canavan, S. J. (Fordham), and Charles N.
R. McCoy (Catholic University), but it is interesting to note that all these persons were or are academically "housed" not in philosophy but in departments of politics, or, in the case of Fortin, in theology. There were other thinkers who approached social and political problems, such as John Courtney Murray, S.J., and John A. Ryan in the United States and Denis Fahey and Edward Cahill in Ireland, but again they tended to discuss these issues in terms of Church-state relations and moral theology, and did so in a somewhat more deductive manner than would be appropriate for political philosophy.  

I should add that the Holy Father, in his philosophical writings on the human person, does address the phenomenon of community in his article "The Person: Subject and Community" and in the last chapter of his book *The Acting Person*. That chapter is entitled, "Intersubjectivity by Participation," and is found under the more general heading of "Participation." This general discussion of community, however, does not develop a specifically political philosophy, although it certainly points the way to it. The Holy Father's work in inspiring and promoting the Solidarity movement in Poland, and the great contribution he made in bringing down one of the worst tyrannies in the history of humanity, are further reasons why philosophical and theological reflection on political life should occur in a cultural center dedicated to his name. I would also like to commemorate the work of Jude P. Dougherty, who is being honored by this conference, and to note the keen interest he has had in political life and political thought, an interest that has been expressed in his activities and many of his writings.

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3 Political philosophy is treated in a more deductive way when it is approached through theology and revelation because it is placed in and derived from a moral context that is more comprehensive than its own. In Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, political philosophy moves toward its first principles from political life itself.


I. THE PERSON AND POLITICS: ARISTOTLE

The classical and unsurpassable definition of the person was given by Boethius early in the sixth century: a person is an individual substance of a rational nature. This definition highlights rationality as the specifying feature of persons; a person is an individual being that is endowed with reason.⁶ According to this definition, there may be persons—divine or angelic—who are not human beings; they too could be individual entities invested with a rational nature, but of course such persons would not enter into politics. Political life requires body and soul as well as personhood.

Persons, in Boethius's definition, are individual entities that possess reason. It is the power of reason, with all that it implies, that makes us to be persons. Even when we use the word person in a less technical way, simply to highlight the fact that the individual in question is a human being and should be treated as such, we imply that the dignity he has and the respect he deserves follow from his rationality and not from some other quality. It is because he is rational, an agent of truth, that he must be "treated as a person and not a thing."

Human reason and hence human personality are exercised in speech, in science and the search for wisdom, in ethical conduct, in friendship, and in religion, and they are also exercised in a distinctive manner in political life. Political societies are communities specifically made up of human persons. If we are to speak about the human person, our discussion would be sorely deficient if we did not treat the domain of human political conduct, and if we did not specify how human reason, in thought and in action, is at work in it.

⁶ Boethius's definition does not involve a genus and specific difference, because individual substance could not express a genus except in a purely verbal or logical sense. The term expresses a particular right from the start, not something common. Persons are essentially indexical. See Robert Spaemann, Personem: Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen 'etwas' und 'jemand' (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1996), 32-44. Spaemann shows that the term person is not a sortal expression.
It is not just that human beings live together. Men live together in families and the kind of extended families we could call villages or tribes. Such communities come about by natural inclination and do not need founders. They are not the outcome of deliberation, reasoning, and argument, as political societies are. They do not have to be conceived before they come into being. Political societies need to be established by acts of reason, and people who succeed in this enterprise bring about a great good for others: Aristotle says that “the one who first established [such a community] is the cause of the greatest goods,” because founders make possible for man a civilized and virtuous life, a life lived in view of the noble, the good, and the just, a life in which human excellence can be achieved and the worst in man can be controlled: “For man, when perfected, is the best of all animals, but when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all.”

One thinks of the benefits that millions of people have enjoyed because of the acts of reason that achieved the founding of the United States of America, most conspicuously, the acts of thinking that took place during the Constitutional Convention in 1787, in the debates that followed, in the ratification of the Constitution by individual states from 1787 to 1789, and at the inauguration of George Washington as the first president in 1789. All these events were exercises of reason, and they in turn followed upon the American Revolution itself, as well as the colonial period that preceded it, when the habits of free political life were established among the people.

It is an act of reason, and therefore an eminently personal action, to establish a political society. To underline this point, we may consider the fact that animals also live together, but their association is not the outcome of an exercise of reason on their part. There are no founders in animal societies; Richard Hassen has asked, ironically, “Would Aristotle say that the first founder

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7 Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.1253a30-31. I have used the Jowett translation of the *Politics*, which is found in McKeon's *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), as well as the translation by Carnes Lord (Aristotle, *The Politics* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984]), but have made many revisions of my own.

8 Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.1253a31-33.
of chimpanzee society was responsible for the greatest of chimpanzee goods?" The question simply does not apply. There are no founders of animal societies. Also, there are no Washington Monuments or Jefferson Monuments in ape or elephant society, because there are among apes and elephants no founders who exercise their reason to establish a society in which reason flourishes. One of the things that reason does when it prospers in a civilization is to acknowledge, by the building of monuments, the founding acts of reason that established the space within which the monuments could be built. This is not to demean ape or chimpanzee or elephant or dolphin society, but to highlight the human difference and the rational character, hence the specifically personal character, of human political association. Political society is established by a determination of the noble, the good, and the just, which is expressed and then desired by reason.

It is important to note, furthermore, that although political life needs to be established by an act of reasoning, it is not therefore purely conventional. It remains part of human nature, but of human nature in its teleological understanding, when human life is seen at its best; it is not part of human nature in the genetic, biological sense. I doubt that researchers in biology will find a gene that programs for political constitutions, or even a cluster of neurons that does so.

Political life is not only founded by an act of reason; it is also sustained and justified by reason. It is carried on by public discussion, in which reason itself is elevated into a higher kind of life than it can reach in familial and tribal community. In the Politics, Aristotle describes political society as the culmination of human communities. In cities, he says, there are two irreducible parts, the wealthy and the poor, and the shape that political life takes on results from the perennial struggle between these two

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10 When the causality of the telos is denied or abandoned, the mind recoils into simply mechanical and genetic explanations.
groups to rule over the whole. The tension between the richer and the poorer parts of a society makes up the *perpetuum mobile* for politics. When the wealthy rule for their own benefit, the city is an oligarchy; when the poor rule for their own benefit, the city is literally a democracy, a rule by the people or the many, since there normally are more poorer than wealthier members of society. Aristotle says that the best outcome for most people in most places at most times, the practically best form of the city generally, is the republic, the *politeia*, which is intermediate between oligarchy and democracy. In a republic, a large middle class—middle in both an economic and an ethical sense—is established between the rich and the poor, the laws and not men rule, and they do so for the benefit of the whole city, not for any particular part. To live this way is a great human accomplishment. It is a truly exalted exercise of reason for citizens to allow the laws to rule, to have the strength of reason and character to subordinate themselves to the laws, which they allow

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11 The "political triangle" of oligarchy, democracy, and republic is treated in book 4 of the *Politics*. The determination of the rich and poor as the irreducible segments of the city occurs in chapters 3 and 4. Democracy and oligarchy, the most common forms of political life and the expressions of these two parts of the city, are treated in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 6 is devoted to the various modifications of oligarchy and democracy. The republic is discussed in chapters 7 and 8. The fact that it is the practically best form of rule is shown in chapter 9. Chapter 11 gives advice on how to strengthen the middle class. One reason why a republic is a good form for political life is the fact that it allows many people to participate in ruling, to be citizens, but without being partisan in their rule. There is more talent, judgment, and virtue in many than in one or a few; see *Politics* 3.11.1281a39-b21. Aristotle also notes that democracies are particularly vulnerable to demagogues, the "leaders of the people"; see *Politics* 4.4.1292a4-38, and 5.5.1304b19-1305a36.

12 It should be noted that in his discussion of the republic in *Politics* 4.7-9, Aristotle does not claim that the republic as such promotes virtue or nobility; he presents it rather as a resolution of the parallelogram of political forces, in which the interests of both the poor and the rich are best reconciled. The two groups are blended into a middle class that will rule through the laws for the advantage of the whole. Virtue as the overriding end of the republican city will arise through that city's participation in aristocracy; see below, note 15. This "value-free" understanding of the republic is expressed in the brief description given in 4.8.1293b33-34: "For the republic is, to state it simply, a mixture of oligarchy and democracy." See ibid., 1294a22-25: "It is evident that a mixture of the two—of the wealthy and the poor—is to be called a republic, while a mixture of the three [wealthy, poor, and virtuous] should more particularly be called an aristocracy (in addition to the genuine and first form)."
to rule for the benefit of the whole. Not all people have the civic habits and public vision to let the laws and not their own partisan interests rule over the whole; not all people are immediately capable of being citizens.

This triad of oligarchy, democracy, and republic is the core of Aristotle’s *Politics*; the entire work pivots around this triangle. I would also make the stronger claim that what Aristotle is describing here is the truth of human political life, and not just his opinion or a description proper to his time and place. He is presenting the “mobilities” of political life, and the various solutions and deviations that are proper to it. What he describes goes on even now, so long as we continue to have a political life. Aristotle is describing politics as a human thing, as a human possibility, not just as a historical fact. If we fail to see this, it is because we ourselves have become incapable of recognizing human nature and have fallen into historical storytelling instead.

Aristotle also discusses monarchy and aristocracy, in which one man or a few virtuous men rule for the good of the whole. These two forms serve as a kind of norm for what all cities can be. 13 Because they admit only a few people to rule, however, they may not be possible once societies become very large (Aristotle admits this limitation), 14 but they must be kept in mind as part of how we design and live our politics: when the laws are made to govern, they should rule as virtuous agents would rule. Also, there is an important qualification in Aristotle’s definition of aristocracy: aristocracy exists either when the virtuous rule because of their virtue (the virtuous become the establishment, the *politeuma*), or when whoever is ruling exercises his or their rule

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13 Kingship is treated and its problems discussed in *Politics* 3 14-17. In chapter 18 Aristotle says that the virtue of a good king and of true aristocrats would be the same as the virtue of a good man. Book 7 in its entirety seems to be a more extended treatment of the best regime, along with remarks about the material conditions under which it could be realized.

14 In *Politics* 3 15 1286b8-10, Aristotle says, “And it is probably for this reason that people were originally ruled by kings, because it was rare to find men who were very much distinguished by their virtue, especially since the cities they inhabited then were so small.” See also 3 17, where Aristotle says that there may be some populations in which it is best if one individual or one family should rule.
for the sake of what is best for the city and its members. Because of this second definition of aristocracy, there can be an aristocratic component to every form of constitution, including a republic.

On the margin of all these forms of political life stands tyranny, the catastrophic disaster that is always lurking as the threat to political life. It is the ever-present sinkhole on the margin of politics. It will always be there; nothing we can do can definitively exclude it as a possibility. In tyranny there is no longer any political life, but only servile subjection to a ruler or rulers who rule for their benefit alone, without any virtuous guidance or purpose. To be ruled tyrannically is incompatible with human nature.

In Aristotle’s view, the best kind of political community will be made up of elements from all the good regimes: there will be monarchical, aristocratic, and popular elements in the various parts of the government. This variety will provide a kind of tensile strength for the city. Each type of city has its own proper political virtue: even the deviant regimes, such as the oligarchic and the democratic, try to shape the people in the city to fit the constitution, and for this reason every city is concerned not only with economic matters, public safety, and defense, but also with the virtue of its people. This conformity of the upbringing with the constitution will happen as a matter of course in every political society, but all regimes have to be measured by the standard of the virtuous man, and the more closely the virtue of the city approximates that of the good man, the agent of moral truth, the better the city will be as a human achievement.

What is common to all cities in which there is a political life—in opposition, for example, to tyranny, where there is none—is the fact that people do argue about who should rule,

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15 *Politics* 3.7 1279a35–37.
16 *Politics* 3.17.1287b37–41; Aristotle says there is no people that is *tyrannikon* by nature, nor is any fit for the other deviant regimes.
17 Each city has to habituate and educate its people to fit the constitution of the city: *Politics* 5.9 1310a12–38 Even oligarchic and democratic cities must do this. If the habits of the people do not fit the laws of the city, Aristotle says, the city will be like the *akratic* man, whose reason and passions are at odds with one another.
that is, they argue about what kind of virtue will set the tone for the city. People who claim that they should rule are trying to do more than just get themselves into the public offices; first and foremost they are also trying to establish a certain way of life, one that they embody, in the community that they want to rule. There always are “culture wars” in political life. Oligarchs, for example, want to live according to the principle that if we are different in one respect (viz., in regard to wealth), we are different absolutely and should be treated as such. The “virtue” in oligarchy is measured by the possession of wealth. Democrats, on the other hand, want to live by the principle that if we are equal in one respect (viz., in regard to liberty), we should be considered equal absolutely. “Virtue” for extreme democrats is the ability to do whatever one wishes, the liberty to satisfy any impulse; that is the kind of life they promote. When people argue that they should rule, they are exercising their reason; this particular exercise of it is higher than the exercise one finds within the family or the village, where such argument about rule does not take place, just as foundings do not take place. Because it is reason that makes us persons, the people engaged in political life are acting more fully as persons than they are able to do in their families and villages. They strive to project and embody a form of human life; they do not just deal with the necessities of life.

It is also the case that there is no one form of the city that is the best absolutely everywhere. Much depends on the population, the circumstances, the lay of the land, the history of the people, and other things. Aristotle distinguishes four senses of the best in politics: first, the best “as we might pray for it,” when all the circumstances are favorable (we may not be able to implement this best form, but we must keep it in mind); second, the best in particular circumstances; third, the best that we can achieve when are faced with a city that is already established; and fourth, the best for most people in most circumstances (effectively, this is the

18 For the understanding of justice proper, respectively, to oligarchs and democrats, see Politics 3.9 and 5.1.1301a25-b4
Political excellence for Aristotle is therefore flexible, adaptable, and analogous, not univocal. It is the outcome of prudential, not mathematical, reason.

Aristotle's description of political life is not relativized by history. It expresses the political possibilities of human nature, and it is as true now as it always was. Aristotle's *Politics* formulates the substance, the *ousia*, of political life better than any other work that has ever been written.20

II. THE MODERN SITUATION

I wish to claim that in our contemporary exercise of political life, in our practice, we do conform to Aristotle's analysis, to the extent that we still have a political life. For example, in the United States the richer and the poorer are clearly appealed to, respectively, by the Republicans and the Democrats, at least as these parties have been defined for most of the twentieth century, and the problem is to fashion a republic, with an inclusive middle class. There are monarchical and aristocratic elements in our political life, and there is always the danger of tyranny. The major difficulty in our modern situation, of course, is the scale of society and the technology that makes such a scale possible. How can anyone survey the common good? How can any political form be embodied in tens or hundreds of millions of people? This is the great challenge to political prudence in our time.

But although we conform in practice with Aristotle, the idea we have of political life in our present day is quite different from

what we find in his teachings. In our public discussion of political life, we tend to think that there is one form of government that ought to be installed everywhere. We call it democracy, and we are impatient if we find places in which it has not been realized; we call such places undeveloped countries, implying that they are politically either childish or stunted.

When we speak this way, our speech is, I think, caught up in an ambiguity. We confuse the republic and the modern state. The republic is the form of government in which laws, not partial, one-sided, self-interested men rule; it is Aristotle’s *politeia*, the constitution that is generally the best that can be attained by most people in most places. The modern state, on the other hand, is something that arose through modern political philosophy. It claims to be something radically new and radically different from earlier forms of government. It is meant to be the definitive solution to the human political problem, not a solution for this time and place. It was initially visualized by Machiavelli and baptized by Jean Bodin with the name *sovereignty*. It was comprehensively described by Hobbes, and worked out and adjusted by subsequent thinkers like Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel.

When we speak of democracy, we tend more or less to think that we are speaking of a community in which the laws rule, not men, but usually we are really speaking about a modern state, the one informed by sovereignty, not a society informed by one of the political constitutions described by Aristotle. We also tend to think that the modern state, modern democracy, has arisen as a perfect, culminating development in human history. It is not seen

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21 Bodin expressed his concept of sovereignty in his *Les six livres de la république* (1576). See the selections in *On Sovereignty*, ed. Julian H. Franklin, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Bodin says, “Sovereignty is the absolute and perpetual power of a commonwealth” (1). He models the sovereign after God (46, 50). He also admits that the concept of sovereignty is not present in Aristotle (47, 50). As Julian Franklin observes, for Bodin “citizenship does not necessarily imply political participation as in Aristotle” (1, footnote).

as one of the forms of political life among many, the form that we may be able to achieve if we are lucky and intelligent enough.

Let me express my own value judgment at this point: to the extent that the word democracy means a republic, it presents a good thing, a form of political life to which one can properly dedicate oneself, one that can be in conformity with human nature and human virtue. The political problem is to determine, by practical wisdom, how the rule of laws ordered toward human excellence can be implemented in our day and age, in whatever part of the world we inhabit. To the extent, however, that the word democracy means the modern state, the one described by Hobbes and glorified by Hegel, it presents a great human problem and an ominous threat to the human person. It is a formula for organizing deracinated human beings.

The modern Hobbesian state was nurtured in absolute monarchies in the early modern period, it showed its face in the French Revolution, and it came into full view in the National Socialist and the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century. In this conference, we commemorate the work of Pope John Paul II, a man who experienced both the Nazi and the Stalinist horrors. He reacted to them, in his actions and words, with a courageous defense of the human person in its dignity before God. His defense of the human person, furthermore, is based essentially on truth, on the human person's ability to hear and discover the truth about the world, about himself, and about God. Pope John Paul II reminds us that human beings are individual substances of a rational nature, and that through their reason they can attain the splendor of truth, even in the face of powers that do their best to extinguish the truth and annihilate the human dignity that flows from it. They truly are powers of darkness, for whom will triumphs over intelligence, power over reason, and choice over life. The problem of the modern state, furthermore, was not resolved by victory in the Second World War and the end of the Cold War. It continues in the development of the therapeutic and managerial state, and much of the human drama in regard to the modern state is going on in this very city and its suburbs. What will we have: a genuine republic
or a Leviathan masquerading as a republic? The question is still open, and human success, in the short term at least, is by no means assured, but it is possible. As this struggle continues into the future, it is quite appropriate that there be in this city an embodied presence of John Paul II, shepherd and stubborn reminder of the dignity of man.  

III. CONTRASTS BETWEEN REPUBLICS AND THE MODERN STATE

Let us speak further about the choice between a republic and Leviathan. I would like to bring out three ways in which these two forms of political life differ. To be more accurate, I should not call them two forms of political life, but the form of political life and the form of mass subjection and individualism.

(1) First of all, in the republic, and in all good political constitutions, reason can be exercised. Men can think and express themselves. The republic is not possible without active human reason. Such reason is exercised in the founding of the city, in the deliberations that go on to determine courses of action, and in specifying the laws of the city and adjudicating the application of the laws. All those who are citizens are able to enter into such exercises of reason; that is what it means to be a citizen, to be able to enter into political reasoning. But besides these political or prudential exercises of reason, there is also in the republic the recognition of the power of theoretical reason, of understanding for its own sake. Besides the ethical and political life of reason, there is a life of simple understanding. Aristotle recognizes this in book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he says that the highest human happiness is found in the theoretic life, but he also acknowledges it in a very dramatic way in book 7 of the *Politics*, chapters 2 and 3.  

He says that the life of thinking is higher than the political, and he implies that if one does not acknowledge the excellence of the life of thinking one will try to satisfy one’s thirst for the infinite by ruling over others, and one will therefore try to

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23 The conference at which this paper was originally given was held, in part, at the John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C.

24 Aristotle’s argument is developed in *Politics* 7.2-3 especially in 1325a31-b32
magnify this domination over as many people as possible, at
home and abroad, even over one’s neighbors and parents and
children and friends. In other words, the life of ruling is not
simply the highest life; we have to take our bearings from something
higher. This also means that there is something in us that
transcends political life, and only when political life acknowledges
such transcendence can it find its proper place in human affairs.
Only then will there be limited government. What this means is
that a true republic, a city limited by laws, will have respect for
the person as an agent of truth, both in the practical and in the
theoretical order. The reason of the human person has its own
directedness and its own appetite for truth; it is not just a tool in
the service of subrational desires.

The modern state, in contrast, as described by Hobbes and
embodied in totalitarian forms of rule, denies the domain of truth.
For it, reason is a tool. The modern state is constituted as a new
reality, as the sovereign, by an act of sheer will by men in the state
of nature, and it exercises its own power simply for its survival
and to prevent the state of nature from returning. The sovereign
state is separate from the people and it lords over them. For
Hobbes, the metaphysical reality of the state is made up of its
own power and its own decisions. There is no truth of human
nature by which it must be measured and to which it must be
subordinated. The state determines even the kind of religion—the
grasp of transcendence—that it will tolerate. The citizens or
subjects are not agents of truth in any way; when they express
their opinions, they are, according to Hobbes, engaged in vain
posturing, not true deliberation:

For there is no reason why every man should not naturally mind his own
private, than the public business, but that here he sees a means to declare his
eloquence, whereby he may gain the reputation of being ingenious and wise,
and returning home to his friends, to his parents, to his wife and children,
rejoice and triumph in the applause of his dexterous behavior.

25 Politics 7.3.1325a34-41.

26 Thomas Hobbes, De Cive 10, §15. See also chapter 1, §2: “All free congress ariseth
either from mutual poverty or from vain glory” I have used Hobbes’s own translation of this
work; see Thomas Hobbes, Man and Citizen, ed Bernard Gert (Garden City N.Y.:
For Hobbes, the sovereign’s will alone should determine public affairs, and even the religious opinions of people have to be segregated into privacy. Such religious beliefs have no public standing as possible truths and cannot be presented as such.\textsuperscript{27} George Orwell was not wrong when in 1984 he has the totalitarian O’Brien controlling not only what one should do, but also how and what one should think, even in mathematics.\textsuperscript{28} There is nothing to transcend the sovereign; as Hobbes’s predecessor and guide, Niccolo Machiavelli, put it, any ideal or best kingdoms, whether Christian or Greek, are figments of the imagination, imaginary kingdoms, that bring about ruin rather than preservation.\textsuperscript{29}

In this political viewpoint, intelligence becomes merely calculation and pragmatic coping with the material needs of life. Even the social contract is just the work of calculating reason. Reason is not insight into truth, because there are no natures or forms of things to be understood. There is only the calculation of consequences. The epistemological skepticism of modernity is not unrelated to its metaphysics and political philosophy. Indeed, Hobbes’s understanding of men as machines and thinking as mechanical motion, which is presented at the beginning of \textit{Leviathan},\textsuperscript{30} is also not unrelated to his political philosophy: this is how human beings must understand themselves if they are to subject themselves to Leviathan. It is how the philosophical spokesman for Leviathan wants them to understand themselves. The mechanistic interpretation of human beings offered to us by


\textsuperscript{28} On Orwell’s insight into the reality of the Soviet system, see Alain Besançon, \textit{La falsification du bien: Soloviev et Orwell} (Paris: Julliard, 1985). The second part of the book is entitled, “Orwell ou la justification du mal.” Besançon’s work abounds in striking phrases. In describing the radical falsity of modern totalitarian rule, he speaks of “ce mensonge universel” (176), and he says, “Un homme sans mémoire est d’une plasticité absolue Il est recrée à chaque instant” (183).

\textsuperscript{29} Machiavelli makes this claim in the famous chapter 15 of \textit{The Prince}.

\textsuperscript{30} See the Introduction and first six chapters of \textit{Leviathan}
reductive forms of cognitive science, in which mind is replaced by brain and human beings are not seen as agents of truth, is teleologically ordered toward the modern state in its pure form.

This then is the first contrast I wish to draw between classical and modern political philosophy: modern thought subtracts the issue of truth from the domain of politics, but a republic acknowledges both practical and theoretical truth and the human person's ability to attain it. We might ask ourselves which of these two options is characteristic of our political culture.

(2) The second point I wish to make is that modern political thought considers the state to be an inevitable development in the history of humanity. For Aristotle, the various constitutions come and go as events move along and people respond to them. There is no necessary destiny driving them on and nothing is definitive; circumstances and choices permit now this form, now that to prevail, and sometimes the political society falls into tyranny. Aristotle encourages us to do the best we can in the situations in which we find ourselves. Political life is an exercise of prudence.

In the modern understanding, and especially in the twist that German idealism and Hegel have given it, the modern state is a definitive achievement. No further prudential and philosophical reflection is necessary concerning political society, because the final answer has been reached in the evolution of world history. This is why we take it for granted that what we call democracy should be installed everywhere, and why we call countries in which it does not exist "undeveloped" countries, or, more hopefully, countries "on the way to development." This belief in the historical necessity of the modern state might also explain why political philosophy has been studied in departments of political science, not in departments of philosophy, in Catholic and non-Catholic institutions alike. The political question is not open any longer. The state is a necessary thing—generated by historical if not cosmic necessity—and hence it is an object of social science, not of fundamental philosophical reflection. Nature has been overcome by history, and the unsettled arguments about who should rule and what form of government should prevail, the disputes among parties, can now be put to
rest. The declarations of the end of history proposed by Alexandre Kojève and Francis Fukuyama are related to this understanding of the modern state.

In contrast with this view of modern politics, I would claim that human nature has not changed, that political life is the same now as it always has been, and that what is truly civic and political in modern states is precisely what is still functioning as a republic, as a rule of laws, in which people are citizens and not subjects, in which it is still possible to deliberate and voice opinions about how we should live, where we can still express ourselves about the noble and the just, and can ask whether the laws we live under are or are not in conformity with the ends of human nature and the truth about man.

In order to foster true political life, it is necessary for us to change our understanding of the history of philosophy. It is necessary for us to overcome the segmentation of philosophy into ancient, medieval, and modern. We must avoid thinking that we can only understand philosophers as the products of their historical circumstances, the products of their epoch. We must recover the idea that philosophy is a perennial thing, that there are philosophical truths that persist throughout all periods and ages, and that there is a truth about human nature and about political life that has been there all along. Human nature does not change, and the nature of political life does not change either. The thing we have to relativize historically is the modern state, not the political life that we find described in Aristotle. The modern state can be explained by its historical circumstances and it can be transcended. Aristotle has brought to light the nature of political life, while Machiavelli, Hobbes, and their followers have described and fabricated a construct, one that is not in keeping with human nature, human reason, or the human person, one that can be explained by the historical circumstances of its emergence.

(3) We have contrasted the republic and the modern state in regard to the issue of truth and in regard to the issue of historical inevitability. The third contrast I wish to draw between the republic and the modern state concerns the relationship each of
these forms of rule have toward other social authorities and other communities, such as the family, the Church, private associations, unions, businesses, educational institutions, and the like. The republic presupposes prepolitical societies. It does not claim to fabricate men or to make men human. It assumes that families and neighborhoods, churches and private associations, can all do their irreplaceable work in forming human beings, and it facilitates and crowns their work by its own, by establishing the city under laws, the city that both presupposes such prepolitical societies and brings them to their own perfection. This assumption of prepolitical societies is expressed in Aristotle's *Politics* by the fact that the household is treated in book 1 as a presupposition of political life, and in that book Aristotle says, "For the political art does not make men." The city makes citizens, but it does not make human beings.

The sovereign state, in contrast, the Leviathan, levels all prepolitical communities and authorities. It makes a clean sweep. The only private societies that it tolerates are those that it permits to exist for its own purposes. Instead of assuming prepolitical societies and bringing them to a higher perfection, the modern state is related to individuals, which it takes out of the state of nature and transforms into a human condition. This change is vividly expressed by Rousseau, who in *On The Social Contract*, describes the legislator or the founder as follows:

The man who makes bold to undertake the founding of a people should feel within himself the capacity to—if I may put it so—change human nature: to transform each individual... into a part of a larger whole, from which he in a sense draws his life and being.

We have seen attempts in twentieth-century regimes to displace and replace the family itself, as well as neighborhoods, educational institutions, and charitable entities such as hospitals by massive governmental bureaucracies and mobilizations. The

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31 *Politics* 1.10 1258a21–22

*homo sovieticus* was only the most extreme form of this titanic totalitarian effort, and we can see what it did to people who lived under it and were its targets. Human cloning and the artificial conception of human life may be a Western scientific version of the same thing. But a coherent society is not possible in a Hobbesian state, because such a state is not in keeping with the nature of man.

**IV. CONCLUDING PRACTICAL REMARKS**

I have discussed both classical political philosophy—which I would characterize not as classical but as perennial—and the modern state, and I have tried to draw some contrasts between them. We have discussed them in regard to three issues; first, whether or not they acknowledge truth and human reason; second, whether they are the outcome of prudential achievement or historical inevitability; and third, whether or not they acknowledge prepolitical human beings, societies, and authorities. It should be obvious that the issues we are discussing are of great human importance. Human life can be terribly tortured by forms of association that destroy political life, and political life can be destroyed by rampant individualism no less than by totalitarian regimes. Modern individualism—what is called liberal individualism—harms the person slowly and silently through a notion of freedom as absence of any and all constraints on the individual's choice; liberal individualism thus undermines its own moral preconditions of self-control, self-governance, and internal, moral freedom. At the other extreme, the collectivism of communism and fascism harms the person suddenly and directly and loudly, through a violent abuse of power that destroys freedom, both external and internal. Thus the two seemingly different modern regimes both destroy the person, although in different ways.

The central question of the last part of my paper is, in what way can the human person be protected, preserved, and enhanced in our modern political context? Can we draw up some agenda items, as tasks for academic life, for the Catholic Church, and for ourselves?
The practical task is for the Church to continue to be active in her defense of the human person. She has in fact done so in things like the Solidarity movement, pro-life causes both in particular countries and internationally, in her educational system, and in her health-care institutions. In other words, the Church herself should continue to act in the public domain. Precisely by defending and exercising her own right to be independent, she creates a wider space for political life for others as well. Political liberty can be preserved only by being exercised.

In a more theoretical domain, the Church can pay greater attention to issues of political philosophy in her academic institutions and even in her seminaries and centers that train people for ministry. It is important to educate people for citizenship, and this does not just mean informing them about the procedures of voting and the mechanisms of government. If men and women are to be citizens, they must be educated about what is at stake in political life, and they must be made better aware of how civic life can be lost. They need a vocabulary for political matters, and the Church can help them acquire it. The clergy and religious should also be helped to understand the nature of political life, lest they become unwitting collaborators in the triumph of the modern sovereign state.33

In particular, the Church should insist on the role of truth in human life and the relevance of truth to political society. In this domain there are a whole cluster of issues of great personal and political significance. It is important to teach both students and parishioners about them, but it is also important to deepen our theoretical understanding of these concepts, and to make room for them in the contemporary cultural and theological conversation. To be more specific about these theoretical issues, it would be important, first, to validate the fact that truth is obtainable, to show that the human mind is able to discover truth, and to spell out the various kinds of truth and the force and extent of each. To do this is not a mere exercise in epistemology, but a defense

of the human person as an agent of truth. To defend the possibility of truth is to defend human dignity. The encyclicals Fides et ratio and Veritatis splendor, as well as the apostolic constitution Ex corde Ecclesiae, are a marvelous charter for this effort. Second, it would be essential to clarify what is meant by human nature and to show how we can speak about human nature. One of the central concepts that needs to be clarified and defended in this respect is the concept of teleology, not only in regard to human nature but in regard to things like life, politics, and religion. Things have ends built into them, and natural ends, the natural perfections of things, are not overridden by the purposes we might have, purposes that we might impose on things. We cannot understand anything unless we know what its end is, that is, unless we know what it is when it is acting at its best.\footnote{For an excellent philosophical treatment of teleology, see two papers by Francis X. Slade: "On the Ontological Priority of Ends and Its Relevance to the Narrative Arts," in Alice Ramos, ed., *Beauty, Art, and the Polis* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 58-69; and "Ends and Purposes," in Richard Hasso, ed., *Final Causality in Nature and Human Affairs* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 83-85.}

These issues of truth, human nature, and teleology lie very deeply hidden within contemporary political life. They are at the heart of many current controversies. If the Church were able to formulate them well, and use her educational institutions to develop and teach them, she would be engaged in politics in the best and most appropriate way: not in particular, partisan political activity, but in what we could call the "higher politics," the understanding of human life in its principles and in its excellence. The Church in her teaching and in her educational institutions should not measure herself simply by the norms set by the secular world. She should set her own agenda, drawing on her own tradition and inspiration. Through her tradition of natural law, the Church has the resources to redefine the contemporary political conversation in terms of the ends of human nature. By witnessing to the truth the Church would be defending the human person, and would thus make a unique contribution to our
contemporary culture and civic life. She would also continue the spirit and teaching of one of her greatest figures, Pope John Paul II. 35

35 I am grateful to Richard Hasing, V. Bradley Lewis, and Francis X. Slade for comments made on earlier drafts of this paper.