

Virtue and the Common Good

The Thomistic Roots of Maritain's Personalism

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Maritain's social thought is usually characterized as being "personalistic" or as being "person-centred". I have no quarrel with these characterizations for it is indeed true that the person is the principal concern of Maritain's writings on society, Justice, and the common good. But, in my view, describing his philosophy in this manner, as many have done, is to overlook another important concern of his social thought, *vis.* virtue, or more specifically, civic virtue. To be sure, Maritain presents no explicit account of this notion in his social and political writings. But a close reading of the texts reveals that his "personalism" derives, in large measure, from the Thomistic theory of virtue. In fact, I shall argue that reference to this theory of virtue is necessary for understanding Maritain, in particular, his conception of the common good. I shall point out further that the inseparability of the person and the common good, which is the basis of Maritain's social thought, has its origin in the Thomistic texts on civic virtue and the common good. Thus I shall begin with some brief comments on Maritain's view on the person and the common good as they are presented in his book, The Person and the Common Good, and then I shall delve into St. Thomas's theory of civic virtue,

showing Maritain's great indebtedness to St. Thomas in this particular respect. I shall conclude with a discussion of the Thomistic underpinnings of Maritain's "personalistic" philosophy of democracy.

(1)

The starting-point of Maritain's social and political philosophy is the thoroughly Aristotelian-Thomistic claim that the human person is by nature a social being.¹ The point is that the human person cannot exist, qua human person, without relationships with others. One's fellows are, as it were, indispensable to one's dignity as a person. But Maritain is careful to distinguish the social life of man from that of other social creatures, as, for example, that of bees.² There is among bees a common interest, vis, the well-functioning of the hive. But unlike men, bees lack a conception of a common good. In Maritain's thought, the distinguishing feature of man's sociality is his ability to pursue a common good together with his fellows. But what is the common good, and how is it different from the common interest the bees have in the well-functioning of the hive or from the common interest men may have in a well-functioning society? For Maritain, the essential feature of the common good is that it can be "received and communicated."³ Consider: having a common interest in society is like holding stock in a company. One's interest in the company is

restricted to the rewards (or losses) that one receives though the company itself can be considered the common interest of all of the investors, oneself included. Similarly, one has an interest in society inasmuch as certain benefits redound to oneself, and this is a common interest because others have similar interests. The common interest, then, is a summation of these particular interests. The pursuit of the common good, contrastingly, requires that a person himself as human person, rather than aggrandize his narrow interests as he would if he were seeking only the common interest. But in perfecting himself as a person, one acquires distinctively human goods like justice, happiness, moral rectitude, etc. Moreover, a person communicates these goods to others, and others likewise communicate these goods to him,⁴ for clearly human goods are such that they must be shared with others. The upshot is that for Maritain the particular human good and the common good are inseparable, a point I shall return to later in this paper.

Maritain's position on the common good may be brought into focus if it is set in relief against liberalism on the one hand and a modern totalitarianism on the other. For the liberal, society originates in the bargaining of self-interested individuals. The result is a contract providing a social arrangement that allows each party to the contract to pursue his interests to the extent that he does not interfere with the interests of others. The classic

statement of this position is the contractarianism of Locke and Hobbes, and, in our own time, John Rawls. What is distinctive in the work of these thinkers, Hobbes and Rawls especially, is the view that a theory of justice need not involve a conception of the human good. All that is required is that the parties to the contract be rational, self-interested individuals. Thus, liberalism fails to find moral significance in any social bonds other than those which arise from contracts. The implication is that whether an individual lead, a virtuous life or an evil life, is from the perspective of the liberal theory of justice, quite irrelevant since justice for the liberal is a quality of institutions or social practices rather than of individuals. Liberalism requires only that one uphold the contracts he has entered into, whether implicitly or explicitly.

The antithesis of the liberal theory of justice is contemporary totalitarianism. The writings of Maritain on totalitarianism suggests that it arose in reaction to liberal's repudiation of the common good⁵ since the individualism the liberal espouses reduces man to a bundle of desires, with the consequence that man is understood merely in terms of his material individuality. But viewing man in this way provides a pretext for submerging the entire man within the social whole, whether this whole be conceived of a class, a race, or a nationality. Moreover, this elevation of the social whole over the particular man is regarded as a

moral imperative because totalitarian morality sees the good as the promotion of the social collective, even if this is to the detriment of individual men. So the working assumption of all forms of totalitarianism is that apart from the social collective, the person has no moral significance, a point which follows, of course, from the materialistic conception of man totalitarianism inherits from liberalism. What results from this is not a society, nor is it a community. Rather, it is an amalgam of individuals, each of whom lacks personal responsibility towards others. This, I must point out, is an important point for Maritain. His social philosophy argues that notions such a 'society' and 'community' are fundamentally moral ones, not because they embody some collective ideal (as they do in totalitarianism), but because they enable the particular person to exercise his abilities as a moral agent.

The conclusion that we may draw from the preceding is that, despite the important difference between the two, liberalism and totalitarianism share two basic positions: (i) a denial of man's moral agency; and (ii) a denial of the common good. With respect to (i), both positions propose an understanding of man that does not allow individual persons to acknowledge the good of others, at least within the social context. If all moral duties arise from contracts, or if there are no duties apart from those one has to the social collective, how can one person act for the good of another

person? But to act as a moral agent, i.e., to make moral choices, is to take the good of others into account. One fails morally to the extent that he does not do this. So we can see that, for Maritain, a defense of (i) commits one to (ii), since the promotion of the common good requires that the good of each person be taken into consideration. Although this is a crucial point for Maritain's social thought, we find it most conspicuously in the political writings of St. Thomas, who holds that the good of the individual person cannot be sacrificed for the sake of the common good. Some have argued that St. Thomas's political

thought allows the ruler to use any means whatsoever to advance the common good.⁶ My contention, however, is that such "Machiavellianism" is foreign to St. Thomas's thought. An examination of his writings will reveal why this is so, as well as bring into focus some of the Thomistic themes the "personalism" of Maritain's The Person and the Common Good tends to obscure.

(2)

For St. Thomas, the virtue most directly related to the common good is that of prudence. He asserts, for instance, that the virtue of prudence can be extended to embrace concerns of the common good, remarking that "since it belongs to prudence rightly to counsel, Judge, and command concerning the means of obtaining a due end, it is evident that prudence

regards not only the private good of the individual, but also the common good of the multitude."⁷ And he states further:

Now just as every moral virtue that is directed to the common good is called legal justice, so the prudence that is directed to the common good is called political (civic) prudence, for the latter stands in the same relation to legal justice, as prudence simply so-called to moral virtue.⁸

The analogy between prudence and civic prudence which St. Thomas proposes in this text suggests that just as personal prudence guides moral action, occasioning virtuous acts and thus the moral perfection of the agent, so civic prudence guides law-maker's promotion of the common good, yielding just laws and thus the moral perfection of the state. But to understand how just lawmaking accomplishes this task, we must examine the relevant texts on government.

In commenting on Aristotle's Politics, St. Thomas suggests that the nature of a commonwealth depends upon how it is ruled.

he [Aristotle] says that a commonwealth is nothing other than the disposition of a city with respect to all the rules that are found in it but principally with respect to the highest rule, which governs all the others. This is so because the imposition of order in a city resides entirely with the person who rules over the city; and such an imposition of order is the commonwealth itself. Hence the commonwealth consists principally in the order of the highest rule, according to the diversity of which commonwealths are diversified.⁹

Moreover, in the Summa Theologiae he states that in a certain sense each person contributes to the enactments of the lawmakers, in the sense that "a law is in a person not only as in one that rules, but also by participation as in

one that is ruled. In the latter way each one is a law to himself, in so far as he shares the direction that he receives from one who rules him."¹⁰ Thus, in receiving this "direction," a person acquires justice but only to the extent that the laws of the state are just. So in S.T. I-II q.92 a.1 St. Thomas asserts that "the proper effect of law is to lead its subjects to their proper virtues: and since virtue is that which makes its subject good, it follows that the proper effect of law is to make those to whom it is given, good, either simply [in respect to the best or just state] or in some particular respect [in respect to an imperfect state]."¹¹ But in saying that the effect of (just) law is to make men good, St. Thomas does not mean that the connection between adherence to the law and the promotion of personal goodness is a purely instrumental one. Rather, he is suggesting that by obeying just laws one practices justice. Hence:

And since law is given for the purpose of directing human acts; as far as human acts conduce to virtue, so far does law make men good. Wherefore the Philosopher says in the second book of the Politics that lawgivers make men good by habituating them to good works.¹²

Nevertheless, St. Thomas does distinguish between the good or virtuous man and the good citizen, i.e., the man who simply assents to the laws of the state. He argues that in the best or just state every citizen must be a good citizen, though every man need not be a good man. The only caveat to this claim is that in the just state the law-maker must be a

good citizen. There appears, therefore, to be a conflict between St. Thomas's contention that the law should make men good and his statement that in the just state the good citizen need not be a good man. These apparently contradictory claims can be reconciled if we note that (in the state) being a good citizen is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for being a good man. In obeying just laws, the good citizen is required to practice justice, but there is more to being a good man than the practice of justice. A good man, for example, must also be temperate and courageous. But still in the very practice of the virtue of justice, which is attendant upon obedience to just laws, the good citizen becomes at least disposed toward the good of others. For St. Thomas, justice is the virtue which directs us toward the good of others. Through the making of just laws, then, the good citizen is directed toward the good of his fellow citizens and therefore toward the common good. Thus the Thomistic conception of justice argues that the aim of just law is the promotion of the common good through the furtherance of individual virtue. But the result of this is establishment of civic peace since justice has as its telos, friendship and common agreement among the various parties within the state. As Aristotle states in a text which St. Thomas comments upon favorably:

Friendship seems to hold states together, and lawgivers to care more for it than justice; for unanimity seems to be something like friendship, and this they aim at most of all, and expel faction as their worst enemy; and when

men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality.¹³

But how is such civic friendship ensured? For St. Thomas, one of the most important purposes of government is allowing each citizen to have a "voice" in the decisions that affect his well-being: for "[t]wo points are to be observed concerning the right ordering of rulers in a state or nation. One is that all should take some share in the government: for this form of constitution ensures peace among the people, commends itself to all, and is most enduring...."¹⁴ So the civic participation which St. Thomas recommends in this text is indispensable to the peaceful and amicable relationships that contribute to the common good. And the practical import of this is that a rule cannot use unjust means to attain the common good, for to use such means would violate the essential meaning of the common good. Clearly, if civic participation in the political and social undertakings of the state is a key constituent of the common good, as St. Thomas does indeed suggest, then an unjust law undermines this participation and consequently the common good as well.

The political philosophy that emerges from this discussion argues that a just social order rests on the common provision of certain social goods, e.g., peace, friendship, etc. It suggests further that the aim of government is the good of the individual citizen. That is,

government should provide the conditions under which individual citizens can live virtuously. But this claim should not be taken in a "paternalistic" sense, for St. Thomas's social thought requires that the individual citizen "participate" in the decisions affecting his good of the individual citizen. That is, government should provide the conditions under which individual citizens can live virtuously. But this claim should not be taken in a "paternalistic" sense, for St. Thomas's social thought requires that the individual citizen "participate" in the decisions affecting his good. It is through such active participation in the communal affairs of the state that a person acquires the social goods that, first, facilitate his practice of virtue and, second, enable him to contribute to the practice of virtue by others. The purpose of the civic prudence exercised by the ruler, therefore, is to guide the citizenry in the practice of virtue, so that the state as a whole will be morally perfected.

(3)

The relevant Thomistic texts, accordingly, suggest an intimate connection between the advancement of the common good, presumably through prudent legislation, and the pursuit of the personal good. Indeed, this is the implication of St. Thomas's claim that citizen's should be able to "participate" in lawmaking. But there is also the suggestion

in St. Thomas that the pursuit of individual virtue necessarily has a social dimension. That is, a person cannot seek his own good without seeking the good of others. This point comes to the fore in Maritain's claim in The Person and the Common Good that certain important social goods are "communicable," thus contributing to the good of entire community.¹⁵ The upshot of this position is that Maritain defends a view of justice, rights, and society that is at odds with current (liberal) thinking on these concerns. Just turning to the notion of rights for a moment, the Thomistic understanding of rights which Maritain's espouses holds that rights depend upon more important moral considerations, viz., the furtherance of one's personal good within the context of the common good. Thus rights ultimately depend upon the moral relationships which members of the community bear to one another. For example, I may have to surrender my right to property if another member of the community requires for his survival the food which I (legitimately) own. This contrasts with the modern view which holds that rights are possessive; one holds them in opposition to the claims. So if I have right to property, I have no moral duty to share my possessions with those who are hungry and in need. So in Maritain's defense of the inseparability of the person and the common good we find the important Thomistic position that the personal good cannot be pursued independently of the wider social good.

The connection between the personal good and the common good is also at the center of Maritain's philosophy of democracy. He describes his position on government as "democracy of the person" and contrasts it with the so-called "democracy of the individual."¹⁶ The distinction between these two kinds of democracy is based upon a more fundamental philosophical distinction, viz., that between authority (auctoritas) and power (potestas). Maritain suggests that authority is the moral right to exercise power.¹⁷ The contention is that in democracy of the individual each individual is free and thus need only to obey himself. So while this form of democracy recognizes no authority over the individual, it preserves his exercise of power. Democracy of the person, on the other hand, recognizes a right to be obeyed.¹⁸ In fact, it would be an exaggeration to say that authority is essential to this form of democracy. The question, however, is the basis of this right. Whence does it arise? For Maritain, the short answer is that it arises from the people. A democracy of the person is one in which free men and women have consented to be ruled. The ruler, for his part, acts as a "representative" of the political community. His right to rule, then, rests on the vicarious nature of his authority.¹⁹ But this conception of authority underscores the Thomistic point raised earlier, namely, that in a just state each person "participates" in lawmaking. The type of civic participation that characterizes the just state

requires that the ruler govern as an agent of the people, so that the direction his subjects receive from his lawmaking enables each of them to become in effect "a law unto himself."

At the basis of democracy of the person, then, is the Thomistic principle that lawmaking should serve the good of the person. A democracy of the person is one in which the goods procured by such lawmaking flow back into the community to constitute the common good. Thus Maritain describes democracy of the person as "organic."²⁰ His issue of this term indicates that in democracy of the person, the good of the individual person cannot be pursued independently of the common good, nor can the common good be pursued apart from the good of the person. To put this in a specifically Thomistic framework, the pursuit of virtue on one's part necessarily has a social dimension and thus contributes to the common good. The promotion of the common good seeks to enhance the practice of personal virtue through the enactment and promulgation of just laws. Accordingly, in St. Thomas's political thought, just lawmaking links the practice of virtue to the wider common good. The outcome of this "linkage" for St. Thomas is a sense of civic friendship, a point on which Maritain's thought concurs. We could go even further and say that the democracy of the person, as Maritain understands it, is in essence a community in which just lawmaking harmonizes the individual practice of virtue so

that each person may benefit further from the promotion of the good of the entire community. For Maritain as for St. Thomas, these benefits are those of civic friendship and social peace.

Finally, it is important to note that in the thought of St. Thomas and Maritain alike the social cultivation of virtue occurs not only with respect to the state but also with respect to the social bodies intermediate between the individual person and the state. For Maritain the democracy of the person is "pluralistic," in the sense that every function which can be assumed by a part must be exercised by that part if the whole is to flourish. In other words, the practice of virtue should be encouraged, first of all, in the setting of the family, local association, trade union, etc, and then in the setting of the state.²¹ This understanding of society, of course, is a statement of the doctrine of subsidiarity, and it has its basis in the Thomistic principle that the perfection of the whole derives from the perfection of the parts. This principle and St. Thomas's development of it in his political and social thought are at the core of Maritain's argument for the inseparability of the person and the common good. So we see that Maritain's personalistic philosophy of democracy, and indeed his entire social thought, is essentially an adaptation of St. Thomas's teaching on virtue and the common good. If Maritain's social

thought is to be understood properly, it must be interpreted with reference to this teaching.

1. Maritain, Jacques, The Person and the Common Good, translated by John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1947) p. 60.

2. Ibid. pp. 49-50.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid. pp. 52-53.

5. Ibid. pp. 91-92 and Maritain, Jacques, Scholasticism and Politics (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1960) p. 83.

6. See Dealy, Glen, The Public Man: An Interpretation of Latin American and Other Catholic Countries (Amherst, Mass.: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1977) Chap. III, note 43.

7. Quia igitur ad prudentiam pertinet recte consiliari, iudicare et praecipere de his per quae pervenitur ad debitum finem, manifestum est quod prudentia non solum se habet ad bonum privatum unius hominis, sed etiam ad bonum commune multitudinis. (S.T. II-II q. 47 a. 10).

8. Sicut autem omnis virtus moralis relata ad bonum commune dicitur legalis iustitiae, ita prudentia relata ad bonum commune vocatur politica: ut sic se habeat politica ad iustitiam legalem, sicut se habet prudentia simpliciter dicta ad virtutem moralem. (S.T. II-II q. 47 a. 10 ad. 1).

9. Et dicit quod respublica nihil est aliud quam ordinatio civitatis quantum ad omnes principatus qui sunt in civitate, sed praecipue quantum ad maximum principatum, qui dominatur omnibus aliis principatibus. Et hoc ideo, quia

impositio ordinis in civitate, tota consistit in eo qui dominatur civitate; et talis impositio in eo qui dominatur civiti; et talis impositio ordinis est ipsa respublica. Unde praecipue respublica consistit in ordine summi principatus secundum cuius diversitatem respublicae diversificantur: sicut in statu populari dominatur populus, in statu paucorum paucivites: et ex hoc est diversitas harum politiarum. Et eodem modo dicendum est de aliis politis. (In Poll, III, lectio 5, para. 385).

10. Ad primum ergo dicendum quod, sicut supra (a. 1 ad. 1) dictum est, lex est in aliquo non solum sicut in regulante, sed etiam participative sicut in regulato. Et hoc modo unusquisque sibi est lex, in quantum participat ordinem alicuius regulantis. (S.T. I-II q. 90 a. 3 ad. 1).

11. Unde manifestum est quod hoc sit proprium legis, inducere subiectos ad propriam ipsorum virtutem. Cum igitur virtus sit quae bonum facere habentem sequitur quod proprius effectus legis sit bonos facere eos quibus datur vel secundum quid. (S.T. I-II q. 92 a. 1).

12. Et quia lex ad hoc datur ut dirigat actus humanos, in quantum actus humani operantur ad virtutem, in quantum lex facit homines bonos. Unde et Philosophus dicit, II Polit., quod legislatores assuefacientes faciunt bonos. (S.T. I-II q. 92 a. 1 ad. 1).

13. Nicomachean Ethics Book VIII, Chap. i, 1155a.

14. Respondeo dicendum quod circa bonum ordinationem principium in aliqua civitate vel gente, duo sunt attendenda. Quorum unum est ut omnes aliquam partem habeant in principato: per hoc enim conservatur pax populi, et omnes talem ordinationem amant et custodiunt... (S.T. I-II q. 105 a. 1).

15. Maritain, The Person and the Common Good, pp. 52-53.

16. Maritain, Jacques, Scholasticism and Politics, translation edited by Mortimer J. Adler (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1960) pp. 99-103.

17. Ibid. , pp. 93-94.

18. Ibid., p. 105.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., p. 100.

21. Ibid., p. 109.