

The Right, the Left and the Person

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La droite, la gauche et la personne

Maritain nous prévient contre le danger de prendre parti entre la droite ou la gauche. Mais il dit aussi qu'il est inutile de penser que nos orientations politiques ou morales ne correspondent pas à une gamme de possibilités actuelle. Donc j'offre, comme une analyse de la situation politique et morale actuelle, un cadre de quatre polarités: 1) la droite politique, qui voudrait préserver les droits de l'individu dans la société; 2) la droite morale, qui voudrait préserver l'ordre social; 3) la gauche politique, qui voudrait promouvoir les droits de la communauté; et 4) la gauche morale, qui voudrait promouvoir la tolérance sociale. Je m'occupe ici de certaines combinaisons des polarités et je cherche à les mesurer à partir de critères relatifs à la personne et au bien commun. Choisir une orientation vers la droite à la fois en politique et en morale préserve bien la liberté, mais maintient aussi une structure d'autorité inégale. Choisir une orientation vers la gauche en politique et en morale sert le bien commun d'un côté, mais l'attaque de l'autre. Choisir une orientation vers la droite morale et la gauche politique sert mieux, de toutes les orientations, la personne et le bien commun. Choisir une orientation vers la gauche morale et la droite politique ne sert que la personne qui voudrait sauvegarder ses propres intérêts personnels.

In Lettre sur l'indépendance Maritain speaks of two senses of the right and the left; one, the physiological and two, the political. The first, he says, is a temperament, some people being of their nature to the right or to the left,¹ while the second refers to holding to the right or left end of the political spectrum. In Le Paysan de la Garonne, Maritain speaks of yet another sense of the right and the left, this being the philosophical-theological.² He takes the opportunity to speak of a new confident left in the Church which has, perhaps, evangelical influences. Indeed, in religious and theological terms, one speaks of the left as being the Protestant evangelical and Reformed Churches, while the right is represented by Eastern Orthodoxy.

Although this distinction has long been around, Maritain spoke, in 1966, of the recent emergence of the philosophical theological spectrum. I, likewise, would like to speak of another spectrum, which surely has always been present, but of which one has the sense that it has recently emerged: this is the moral spectrum. Despite ever-present nostalgic feelings that previous generations were more morally right, it seems evident to historians that the full spectrum of moral attitudes is a constant within human history. If something has emerged in recent times, however, it is perhaps the legitimacy of the morally left. What was regarded as

"moral" from the perspective of previous generations would be regarded as "morally right" from the perspective of contemporary western society.

Maritain compared the temperamental right and left to the political spectrum,³ as he did with the philosophical-theological right and left. I, too, would like to compare the moral spectrum with the political right and left. Before making such comparisons, Maritain warned against the dangers of "being of" the right or "of" the left; such stands have a tendency toward extremism. Choosing the right or the left means that one would thereby be oriented by their doctrines. Fence-sitting is, however, according to Maritain, also a useless endeavour, because if one is not to be lukewarm, then one's temperamental, theological or moral orientation must necessarily fit into the spectrum and one should therefore be able to describe oneself in terms of the spectrum (yet without being oriented by it).

If we actively and, I would say, responsibly know where we stand in relation to these spectrums, then necessary criteria are a defined anthropology and a defined sociology. I would, therefore, propose measuring the political and moral spectrums against Maritain's notions of the person and the common good. I suggest that personalism, with respect to the moral spectrum, must lead one, as Maritain said with regard to the theological spectrum, to feel closer to the right; but with regard to the political spectrum, personalism leads one to feel closer to the left.

To describe what I mean by the political spectrum let us use for argument's sake the system which has arisen in the 20th century western world with conservative governments pursuing laissez-faire economic policies on the right, and socialism on the left. Let us also for the moment ignore the extreme totalitarian regimes of the right and the left, which cloud the issue of the spectrum as they so often metamorphose and in the end resemble one another. As for the term "political," that being the adjective, I understand something very much akin to the adjective "politic"; but since this term often carries negative connotations, let us understand the political as that which is done for the expressed purpose of achieving a desired end.

I referred above to the recent apparent emergence of a moral spectrum because of the legitimacy of liberal moral behaviour. Although it would be near impossible to give a satisfactory account of the moral spectrum, let us in a limited way define the morally right end of the spectrum as that which preserves traditional social institutions, such as marriage; while the morally left is characterized by the liberalization of such institutions (and the right of individuals to place the pursuit of their own well-being above the pursuit of the well-being of others). Therefore, let us understand the moral as behaviour conducted to socially acceptable standards, be it standards set by the right or the left.

Given that the political and moral spectrums are commonly understood to exist in this way in contemporary Western society, I would like to present a schema of four polarities of the right and the left. We will look first at those polarities of the right. The simple terms in which these polarities are stated no doubt forces them to endure a certain distortion; however, they are characteristic. The first of these, the political right, seeks to preserve the prerogatives of the individual within the whole.⁴ The second polarity, the morally right, seeks to preserve social order. As for the polarities of the left, the political left seeks to promote the prerogatives of the community. And finally, the morally left seeks to promote social tolerance.

It is the combinations of these polarities which I wish to examine and measure against the criteria of the person and the common good.

Out of the four possible combinations, let us first look at the morally right-politically right option. A certain balancing occurs in this orientation, with a desire to preserve social order on the moral side, checking the free movement of individuals within the community on the political side. One aspect common to both sides is the desire to preserve. This carries what some might describe as a harmless nostalgia for the better times of the past; but the more dangerous aspect of this desire is an overbearing wish to preserve established authority, regardless of its justness. The combination of guarding a moral social order

by individuals who are at the same time attempting to preserve their own political freedom can hardly be one which is in the best interest of the common good.⁵ In the end, this results in the preservation of a hierarchical authority structure which views movement toward equality as a corruption. Also, because of the inherent authoritarianism of this orientation, it carries a view that the community as a whole is not capable of governing and therefore should not do so; thus, it regards the right to govern as the duty of an elite.⁶ Although there may be genuine concern for the common good on the part of such an elite, the best that may be hoped for is a kind of philanthropy which of its nature must preserve the top of the power structure so that it may provide for the bottom. When the moral side of this combination is measured against the spiritual ends of the person, or the person before God, the desire to preserve social order takes on a different appearance. According to the popular definition of liberty, as a simple freedom from restriction, the morally right is an impediment; but, if freedom is understood in terms of the spiritual ends of the person, as the ability to pursue the good, then the morally right which provides the necessary social order is liberating. Therefore, although the morally right-politically right combination preserves an anti-egalitarian authority structure, nevertheless it is one deserving respect because of its sincere regard for liberty

as understood with respect to the spiritual ends of the person.

The second combination is that of the morally left-politically left. Here we have the promotion of the prerogatives of the community combined with the promotion of social tolerance in the moral sphere. Here, too, there is a balancing effect, something of an inverse of the first combination, with the promotion of liberty in the moral sphere and a lack of it in the political sphere. In terms of the common good, this option can go a long way toward providing for communal needs and soliciting genuine concern for the whole of society on the part of people within it, both people at large and people in authority. As Maritain said: "...une seine politique chrétienne...paraîtrait sans doute aller fort loin à gauche dans l'ordre de certaines solutions techniques..."⁷ As for spiritual concerns, the morally left option can lead to moral anarchy with each person only morally responsible for one to self. The ethical, which is by nature social, becomes confused and thereby inhibits the person's pursuit of the good, because the good of the person is, properly speaking, the good of society. Therefore, from the point of view of the spiritual concerns of the person, the morally left, while proclaiming liberty, actually restricts it. Although, this option of the morally left-politically left provides for the promotion of the common good, it comes down very hard on the liberty of the person.

The third combination is that of the morally right-politically left. The morally right, as I have outlined in the first combination, when looked at with respect to the spiritual concerns of the person, is a defender of liberty with regard to the person's ability to pursue the good. The politically left option, as outlined in the previous combination, is well-suited to advocating the common good and requiring people in society to respect and work for the good of the community. Therefore, we find here a balance between liberty and social concern and a genuine compatibility with the spiritual concerns of the person. This combination, of the three described so far, is the best suited to the ends of the person and the common good. If the polarities and combinations, as I have outlined them, bear any resemblance to the realities of the modern Western world, then this option of the morally right-politically left is the only responsible choice of the religious person in the modern world.

To turn to the fourth combination, the morally left-politically right, as with the previous combination, both sides have been outlined above; the morally left, it was seen, can lead to an ethical anarchy, because people pursuing the freedom of choice can have little regard for the communal good which flows from socially-based concerns. As for the political right, we have seen how there can be genuine concern in this political orientation; it does, however, lead to a hierarchical system and the retention of authority

structures which, at best, attempt to work for the good of society by maintaining an elite who themselves deem the community as not capable of directing itself. This is indeed the option for those who wish for nothing but to be self-serving. The morally left side allows them to act as they will ethically, with at most the only demand on them being to allow others to behave similarly,⁸ while the politically right option allows for the potential to direct others according to one's own will, while at the same time providing for the maximum amount of liberty from social responsibilities. Thus, this combination leads to a real denial of liberty. In the end, the morally left-politically right combination is but a sinister inverse of the only responsible choice of the religious person, that of the morally right-politically left.

I have not outlined ideal political and moral polarities, nor have I tried to describe how they should operate in the Christian world. Maritain has attempted to do this at length in Humanisme intégral. In Man and the State, Maritain offered many practical suggestions which would not only aid in the realization of these ideals, but which would also prevent the excesses of Communism, Liberalism and the Laissez-faire economic system alike. I, on the other hand, have tried to describe these polarities, as they exist in the modern world--albeit in a very simplified form. What I have proposed is an option for the religious person dealing with contemporary society. It is absolutely necessary never to

forget the political and moral ideals which must be striven for if the realities of the modern world are to be changed and not simply accepted for what they are. Nevertheless, my analysis of the contemporary situation and the choice of the religious person in it is a necessary step for anyone who wishes to change the political and moral realities for the better. As Maritain explained in the Le Paysan de la Garonne, one should not be of the right or of the left, and thereby be oriented by it, but neither can one fence-sit and pretend that one's moral and political outlooks have nothing to do with the right and the left.

1. As Maritain points out in his Lettre sur l'indépendance, Oeuvres Complètes Vol. VI (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1984) p. 275, at the extreme right is the person of pure cynicism, who detest justice and charity, and who prefers, in the words of Goethe, injustice to disorder. At the extreme left is the person of pure non-realism, or idealism, who detest being and who prefers, in the words of Jean-Jacques, what is not to what is.

2. Jacques Maritain, Le Paysan de la Garonne (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1966), p. 38-47.

3. It does not necessarily hold that one who is of the right or left politically is of the same orientation temperamentally. As Maritain states in Lettre sur l'indépendance , p. 276: "Il n'y a plus terrible révolutions que les révolutions de gauche faites par des tempéraments de droite [Lénine]; il n'y a plus faibles gouvernements que les gouvernements de droite conduits par des tempéraments de gauche (Louis XVI)."

4. The politically right prefers to see a thin line between society and the state; thus, it believes that there is a fundamental incompatibility between civil liberties and obligations to the community.

5. Henry Bars has pointed out in La Politique selon Jacques Maritain (Paris: Les Éditions Ouvrières, 1961) p. 85, the person of the right prefers order because it profits him.

6. Maritain notes in Lettre sur l'indépendance,

p. 47-8, the person of the right is a pessimist about human resourcefulness, while the person of the left is an optimist.

7. Maritain, Lettre sur l'indépendance, p. 278.

8. This combination only passively holds to the duty of ensuring the liberty of othes, because by maintaining the position of elites it simply allows for people to fight for their individual freedom.