Political Philosophy and Catholicism
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Political philosophy and revelation are often considered antagonistic to each other. They are distinct in their approach to their subject matter. However, they are not unrelated within their own scope. What is treated here is how this non-contradictory relation can be stated and maintained.

“Political philosophy” means primarily not the philosophic treatment of politics, but the political, or popular, treatment of philosophy, or the political introduction to philosophy—the attempt to lead the qualified citizens, or rather their qualified sons, from the political life to the philosophic life.

—Leo Strauss

The end of the theoretic sciences is a good which lies outside the sphere of the human will; the truth of the theoretic (speculative) intellect. The contemplative life, most perfectly ordained to this intelligible good, is the life to which the political virtues and the arts themselves are ordered.

—Charles N. R. McCoy

I.

Catholic social thought is that body of official reflection—theological, philosophical, political, economic, social, familial—that has been presented as authoritative by bishops, the papacy, and national episcopal conferences. It is designed to give a reasoned explanation and justification of the Church’s understanding of the public order and human life within it. Its sources are reason, tradition, Scripture, and experience. Political philosophy inquires about the place of the transcendent within the city. Though the two ought to be aware of each other, the object and the sources of each are different and need to be distinguished. Philosophy strives to make distinctions clear so that we can know and speak accurately about what is. This knowing and speaking is what the mind is “for.”

Catholic social thought is not exclusively a discipline of human origins. While upholding reason and recognizing its scope, it acknowledges and benefits from the information and inspiration found in revelation. It sees this source as a valid guide to understand the human enterprise. The present essay concerns the way reason and revelation relate to each other.
in a non-contradictory manner. In this sense, it points to the “natural” end of what is implicit in political philosophy, namely that its completion is not in philosophy itself. But philosophy enables us to see why a transcendent end is feasible. This is the point Charles N. R. McCoy made in the introductory citation about the good that lies outside the will, and is not created by the will. To understand this relationship of political philosophy, philosophy, and revelation, one must begin with the contemplation “for its own sake” that is philosophy. Philosophy seeks knowledge of the whole; yet the whole escapes it. This very escaping is the central problem of all of philosophy, the quest for the truth of things. It is likewise the reason why philosophy cannot exclude revelation and remain itself coherent. It cannot logically claim to be open to the whole while deliberately excluding something recurrent within the whole.

Man is by nature a “political animal,” as Aristotle explained at the beginning of his *Politics*. But each human being is a “whole.” He is primarily created for what transcends the city, for eternal life. Transcending the city does not mean bypassing it or denying it. The two ends of man—the political and the transcendent—are, in principle, compatible with each other. They have a common origin. They can diverge from their respective ends, however, because of free will, itself natural to what-it-is-to-be a human being. No rational being can achieve its end apart from its own knowing, choosing, and accepting it as given, as gift. The inner life of the human person as it is related to others, including the origin of being, is the locus of the primary “action” in the universe. This is the action wherein what is and what is not of God are decided. The universe exists in the first place in order that the drama and story of free persons be carried out in time. There is no collective inner-worldly entity that gathers together all human beings. The creation of such an entity is not the purpose of the existence of man in this world.

An incident in the New Testament illustrates these points. The rich young man can be compared and contrasted with the young potential philosophers that populate Plato’s dialogues. The rich young man, on considering what Christ requested of him, decided not to accept the invitation. No indication in the text suggests that he was not intelligent enough to know what was at stake—just the opposite. Subsequently, we read, in memorable, even poignant, words, that, after his decision, he “went away sad” (Matthew 19:22). He did not take the nobler alternative to which he was invited. Most modern thought on the same subject would consider that actually embarking on the “higher road” offered to the rich young man was equivalent to rejecting man’s autonomous and unlimited freedom. In
this hypothesis, he should have gone away elated. He chose to be “his own man,” as it were.

The rich young man, of course, was not, as in Plato, encouraged to become a philosopher. He was simply invited to sell what he possessed and follow Christ. The life that he was leading did not seem to be intrinsically disordered or evil. Still, we are made conscious that a conflict can exist between the good and the very good. This conflict resides in the order of rational freedom, of greater and lesser goods and abilities. We find no sign that, because of his choice not to follow Christ, the young man somehow lost his soul. He lost something, no doubt; and he could have lost his soul, but probably he didn’t. Nevertheless, something greater that might have existed seems to have been lost by his choice to go away. Otherwise, he would not have been invited in the first place.

II.

What I want to indicate, by recalling this incident from Scripture, is the place of political philosophy as an intellectual discipline. Different issues are treated by different disciplines. Politics is not metaphysics. “Methods” only reveal what they are designed to reveal. No single method that we know of gives us access to everything *that is*. Reality is always more than the methods designed to know it. Much of reality remains outside of the methods used to understand some aspect of it. Disciplines can be distinguished and ranked according to their respective ends. We deal with things that are good, and other things that are very good. We also classify, in the order of intelligibility, what is opposed to the good.

We might add that the world will not have ordinary people in it if it does not, at the same time, have extraordinary ones. This observation would include both the good and the evil. A realistic understanding of both the worst regime and the worst man is as important as an understanding of the best—and the proper location of each. Any discipline, when it does what it is designed to do, opens out onto what is beyond itself. Political philosophy is aware that philosophy exists, that it deals with *what is*, not just the order and end of the city. Political philosophy points to philosophy, but indirectly, by being aware of its own limits. It knows the implication of Aristotle’s remark, “If man were the highest being, politics would be the highest science.” The politician who thinks politics is the highest science is the tyrant who finds the operative source of action in himself.

The way to deal with political things is not the way to deal with philosophic things. But it is possible to deal with both after their own manner. Nor is the purpose of political philosophy to make everyone either a philosopher or a statesman. A city containing only philosophers is not a city
and could not last. A city also needs farmers, craftsmen, merchants, scientists, artists, and priests. Aristotle was not wrong to see that the common man could know many sane things without necessarily knowing complicated arguments about them. But a good politician is aware that, if we do not have in the city at least some philosophers who are engaged in concern for the truth of things for its own sake, the political order will be headless.

Speaking of Aristotle’s notion of contemplation in relation to the city, Joseph Pieper put the matter succinctly:

We suddenly see the new and forceful validity in the old principle: “It is required for the good of the human community that there should be persons who devote themselves to the life of contemplation.” It is contemplation which preserves in the midst of human society the truth which is at one and the same time useless and the yardstick of every possible use; so it is also contemplation which keeps the true end in sight, gives meaning to every practical fact of life.⁵

Aristotle is also aware with Plato that prideful philosophers whose end is themselves can destroy a city. No city exists without an explicit or implicit philosophy to justify its order of rule—some to its glory, and others to its destruction. The educated or, better, prudential politician, the statesman, must know enough not to kill the philosopher and also enough not to let the corrupt sophist rule.

Political philosophy, then, looks at the city; yet, it is aware that not everything belongs to the city. It understands the often justified mistrust that good statesmen and ordinary citizens have for those who call themselves wise, something classically recalled in books eight and nine of the *Republic*. The most serious long-range danger to cities arises first in the souls of philosophers. The statesman/ruler is not himself a philosopher, though he does have good prudential judgment. He recognizes the insufficiency of politics to be the highest science, even though it is the highest of the practical sciences, the sphere of the human actions of mortal men in this world. The statesman understands the importance of and difficulty of citizens to acquire the virtues, including especially the friendship that relates to virtue.⁶ He also understands that virtue itself makes possible the consideration of things for their own sakes.

The philosopher sees that the best regime exists only in speech. The better actual regimes are worthy of ruling. But even the best of them is not to be confused with the best regime in speech. In the later Christian view, this distinction was the basis of Augustine’s gloss on the *Republic* in his *City of God*. The best regime was not a regime in this world. To try to make it so—the temptation of modern political thought—led both to the destruction of worthy cities and to ideological efforts to reconstruct
not just the polity but man himself. No human philosophic reconstruction of man is better than what man is by nature. The history of political philosophy, with its “brilliant errors,” as Strauss called them, is basically an empirical proof of this position.

III.

The task of political philosophy is to convince the politician that, while he has authority along with power over life and death, he is not the highest authority. Even as statesman/ruler he is subject to the order of both political and natural things. How the city and its politicians understand the place of philosophy itself is what concerns political philosophy. It first arises out of the deaths of Socrates and Christ at the hands of the best existing cities of their time, the Greek polity and Roman law. Both men were condemned to death in legal trials for the act of upholding the truth before the law. Christ, in a memorable phrase, acknowledges that Pilate, the Roman governor, does have authority. But the authority he has is “given to him” by Christ’s Father (John 19:11). That is, political authority is itself subject to a higher law and falls within it in its proper exercise.

As he affirmed in the Apology and Crito, the principle that Socrates stood for, at the cost of his life, was that it is “never right to do wrong.” This principle is the foundation of all civilization. To empower the prince to use evil to rule is to destroy any grounded appeal to justice. But, as Socrates put it, nothing evil could happen to the good man. Death is not the greatest evil. Doing what is wrong is the greatest evil. Such an evil must always be a chosen thing by a free person. Contrary to Hobbes later on, the greatest evil is not violent death. The greatest evil consists in denying truth by doing what is objectively wrong.

But, as Plato clearly saw, unless these principles are upheld—that is, seen as intelligible—the world is incoherent. One can do wrong with ultimate impunity if there is no final sanction to violations of justice. Both the death of Socrates and that of Christ are central to political philosophy because they affirm that, after death, a judgment of moral and political things, both good and evil things, will occur. Ultimately things do cohere. Our understanding of this world is not adequate unless the deeds of those who have, in freedom, lived in it are judged. The significance of actual human lives must be resolved in terms of what they were in their choices.

In this context, what might Catholicism have to do with precisely political philosophy? Should not political philosophy be independent of any revelational considerations? In fact, very little about politics is found in the New Testament. There are, to be sure, some things that give pause—the recognition that Caesar has things due to him. At Jesus’s trial, at one point,
Pilate, the Roman governor in charge of the formalities, responds famously, “What is truth?” as if to imply that he is not bound by something that he does not admit. The issue is pretty much the same as that of Socrates. The first book of the Republic is devoted to the question of whether might is right. When it came to the question of Socrates’s condemnation at his trial, the majority of citizens present voted for his death. In the case of Christ, the crowd affirmed that they had “no king but Caesar” (John 19:15).

Subsequent readers of these trials sense that justice was not observed in them. Can we leave it at that? The issue can be universalized. “The good man will be killed in all existing cities, even the best ones.” This view was already present in the second book of the Republic. In all existing polities, the just man would be killed, the evil man prosper. This result is essentially why the issue of the best regime, which is the central question of political science, had to be seen as a city in speech. It was not an actual city with the normal variety of human characters and occupations. It takes this diversity of endeavor to make up a city. But a city in speech, in the mind, is not an illusion. Its existence in the mind is a real intelligibility, the conclusion of a logic. Its existence is argued, not founded in a given place and time. It serves as a standard both to see actual regimes more clearly and to judge them. But it also points beyond the political regimes of mortal men.

The human mind, as Plato saw, cannot accept the fact that those who do injustices will simply get by with them. In this sense, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is a philosophic doctrine. It is posited because of the insufficiency of human cities as manifested in the trials of Socrates and Christ. Unless the immortality of the soul is true, no city of speech can be thought. Or better, immortality is itself contained in the logic of the best regime and its proper location. Evils have to be punished and good deeds rewarded properly. Otherwise, the world is incoherent. We cannot live with that thought.

IV.

The essence of the Christian teaching is that Christ, true God and true man, suffered, died, was buried, rose again, and ascended into heaven, from whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. This cycle indicates the completion of a plan that found its origins in the Old Testament and ultimately in the Godhead itself. The central events depicted are facts, not myths. It will be immediately noticed, however, that Christianity does not rest its case on the immortality of the soul but on the resurrection of the body. It is not that the Greek reflection on immortality is wrong or not also accepted in Christian terms. What is striking about it and its reality is how this teaching is a key issue in political philosophy. How so?
The proposition that the resurrection pertains to political philosophy will naturally be greeted skeptically. It should be. But let me at least sketch why the link between political philosophy, existing polities, and the resurrection of the body may make some unexpected sense. Let me begin with the end of the *Republic*. In the Platonic corpus, what was this ending about? It was literally the answer to a perplexity that Plato saw in existing cities. On hearing the issues at stake, most citizens would grant that good men do not survive in cities and that bad ones are rewarded. If this understanding be so, little case can be made for being just or good or for encouraging others to be so. If there is existentially no requiting of justice, no ultimate difference between right and wrong, we must grant incoherence to the world. The doctrine of immortality was designed to show that evil deeds are finally punished and good ones rewarded. But for this judgment to take place, the soul had to continue after death. This point was the significance of Socrates’s comment to the jury after they voted to execute him. He simply said that “No evil can come to a good man.” The evil came to the unjust. Meantime, Socrates would probably be conferring with friends and gods.

If we assume the logic of this argument, and it is very well formulated, why not rest there? Is there, in other words, anything yet to be considered that would link Christianity directly to political philosophy in a way not already established by Plato? What we need to establish is that something more needs to be attended to. What is this? First, there is the Aristotelian argument that what-it-is-to-be man is not simply a soul, however much that soul also needs accounting for. What is it, in other words, that is lacking? The first thing has to do with the critique of Plato. Man is body and soul, not just soul. His acts are the acts of his person, the whole of his being what he is.11

Logically, this recognition means that justice cannot be requited by considering the soul alone. The soul by itself was not what acted. It was the whole person who acted either for virtue or against it. If this approach be valid, then the justice and injustice experienced in the city—hence politics as the arena of human action—cannot be fully requited or rewarded unless the person who performed the act is fully present in judgment. In this sense, the resurrection of the body is a proper response to an enigma that was already present in classical political philosophy. We need not argue that Christ’s resurrection was directly intended as a contribution to political philosophy. What we do need to aver to is that something unanswered or unattended to in political philosophy was completed by the fact of the resurrection of the body.
On this point, we might also refer to the story in the *Phaedo* of the man being punished in the rivers of the underworld for his crime of murder. He is to remain there in punishment until the man whom he murdered forgives him. From a Christian viewpoint, while the necessity of forgiveness is granted, this account has one major defect. A sin or crime is not solely against the person who suffers from the unjust act. God also “suffers” from this act. In this sense, our sins reach beyond our present lives. They require divine forgiveness, which is made present in the suffering and death of Christ.

Ultimate justice is restored in this way, through suffering, as the Greeks also understood. What follows from this connection is that both Christ and we ourselves must forgive when forgiveness is asked. Forgiveness cannot be blanket. It requires some input on the part of the one who puts disorder into the universe. This is what sin is: the failure to put good in the world so that our acts lack what ought to be there. Recall that evil is the lack of a good that ought to be there. Justice, in principle, is restored the moment the one who does evil recognizes and admits that what he did was wrong. He recognizes, in other words, that the world is not incoherent, that it has an order.

V.

The resurrection of the body thus restored the whole person who committed the evil act or the good one. Without this final wholeness, the world is still incoherent. Modern trans-humanism, which is essentially a parody of the doctrine of resurrection, seems to recognize this in its efforts to keep the individual person alive down the ages. The revelational teaching or fact of the resurrection of the body is a requirement that arises out of politics itself, out of the inability of any existing city to punish all crimes or reward all virtue. Both the Platonic and Christian positions are needed for a complete whole. We might add that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, from a Christian point of view, guarantees that the resurrected person will be the same one that died and that animated the person to good or evil acts. Whatever might be said for or against the relation of political philosophy to revelation, it seems clear that they belong to one and the same logical order and discourse. The exclusion of revelational considerations thus is a deliberate refusal of philosophy to open itself to the whole.

The final link is also found in Aristotle’s notion that what exists as fully human is a single substance, body and soul, not just a soul using a body. The fact that legislators, in Aristotle’s view, are more concerned with friendship than justice takes the final step. We can arrive at the intelligibility of resurrection beginning from sin or disorder of soul. But we can
also arrive at it from reflection on friendship. In all true friendship, we find a sense of lastingness. It is not just the principle that “greater love than this no man hath but to lay down his life for his friend”—though it certainly includes this understanding. Aristotle had speculated about the apparent lack of friendship in the First Mover. It seemed odd that what was the perfection of human virtuous communication would be lacking in the divine.

Aristotle was right. It was a theoretic lack. The response of revelation was, essentially, in retrospect, a carrying out of Aristotle’s notion of God as “thought thinking itself.” The revelational fact was that God was not monolithic, not intrinsically lonely, but an order of personal being and love that was complete in itself in such a manner that God did not really “need” the universe or men in it. This recognition meant logically that the world existed as an ordered gift, not as a necessity due to some lack in the divinity. The importance of political philosophy is the way it serves as a link between the issues that arise in the cities of the world and the transcendent whole that is each person in his final meaning as a finite, free being who does not, in the end, return to nothingness.

What then should remain clear is that political philosophy as an effort to understand all of reality through what happens in actual cities brings forth its own concerns. It arrives at enigmas that it cannot itself fully comprehend. Yet it can formulate the problem. Revelation is its own account of reality. Within it are certain events and understandings that illuminate what they are. They have their own intelligibility. We cannot argue from reason to revelation. We do find, however, elements in revelation that are also open to reason. The purpose of revelation is not directly political, but its truths do make clear many things.

What is striking is that certain truths found in revelation provide sensible answers to the main perplexities of justice and friendship that political philosophy does not by its own methods solve but does inquire about. I would conclude from these considerations that reason and revelation, political philosophy and the city, are intelligibly related. Each, by being what it is, illuminates the other. Both by being themselves are required fully to explain man’s philosophic, social, human, and transcendent life in its ultimate status—called, in the tradition, “eternal life.” The plan of the universe from the beginning included each human person and was to bring about this end. It is in the mind holding all these things together in which we can see the surprising coherence of all things.

Notes


