

Introduction:
Modern Political Ideas

We are, no doubt, in a time of political confusion and passionate conviction. Division, anger, and strife have become the chief characteristics of politics in the twenty-first century. Thoughtful and dispassionate political discourse is rare. Of course, this is true of every age: politics, conflict, and competition are inevitably intertwined, and in part this may be explained by the fact that there is so much at stake. Yet there is something unique about our own political malaise, namely, our apparent inability to resolve our political disagreements in a rational and realistic manner. Simply stated, we cannot find any point of departure from which we may adjudicate our political disputes. Accordingly, rhetoric and tempers rise and, in the final analysis, politics devolves into a mere competition for power. Citizens of advanced countries seem to have no shared framework for political discourse and as such, they cannot even understand those with opposing perspectives. This is an example of what Alasdair MacIntyre identified as incommensurability.¹ Ideas are incommensurable when they are *radically* incompatible to such a degree, that they *cannot* be reconciled.

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Third Edition (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), chapters 1 and 2.

Mere disagreement is not enough to make differing opinions incommensurable. Rather propositions are incommensurable when there is no possible shared frame of reference by which the opposition could be adjudicated or even understood. And this is where we find civic life today – riven by incommensurable political perspectives. How did this confusion and fragmentation arise within the countries of advanced modernity? And more importantly, what are the prospects for overcoming the situation?

Beneath the surface of partisan rhetoric and emotional reactions, our political world is shaped by powerful but often ill-understood ideas; ideas about justice, community, and human nature that, like the deep currents in the ocean, shape and shift the surface but lay hidden out of sight. Learning about these epoch-making ideas, sounding these currents of thoughts will bring into the light *the real philosophical conflict that is at the heart of our political malaise*. In doing so, we will come to see what is really at stake in our political struggles and even, perhaps, be forced to examine the conflicting ideas and desires within ourselves. Without this insight we are likely to misunderstand ourselves and the political world in which we operate. What we see in politics is an aggregate picture of the spiritual warfare that goes on in the heart of every man. To address this reality is a task of discernment, understanding, and self-examination, which is made more difficult by the fact that our political experience is refracted through distorting ideologies.

Sometimes “ideology” is used as a synonym for any set of political ideas or theories. As such, it does not necessarily carry a pejorative meaning. However, in the world of political philosophy, ideology is definitely something to be avoided. “Ideology” is an *a priori* – preset – set of ideas that interpret political processes and events according to an already arrived at agenda. This approach to politics is problematic because it predetermines outcomes and policies regardless of reality and history. It is rooted in the will, the desire to achieve some outcome. As such, it is not about truth or reality. Indeed, ideology distorts the reality of politics both in particular historical circumstances and in general. It deludes and misguides the general public, confuses discourse, and empowers activists and demagogues.

Ideology always involves a diminished sense of reality. And this is a peculiar failure of modern politics. *Vice and stupidity always infect politics, but blindness to metaphysical reality is the peculiar curse of modernity.* Here we find the elevation of the “ideal” over the real and concrete, which a distinctive characteristic of modern thought. Modern politics is the absence of reality in favor of the *ideal*. This elevation of the ideal over the real is one of the most important long-term of effects of the Enlightenment, in which religion, custom, and classical metaphysics were rejected in favor of the autonomy of human reason. Within the historical framework of the Enlightenment, a truncated version of reason became

the measure and standard rather than nature or God. In this way man became autonomous, a law unto himself and the same can be said for reason. This attitude is most clearly manifested in the claim of Immanuel Kant that “enlightenment” means throwing off the tutelage under which mankind has labored for too long.² Man is “enlightened” by himself and “dares” to think for himself; he is no longer fettered and controlled by religious authority or the “lead-strings” of nature. When a narrowly construed reason sets itself over nature and sets itself up as the standard and rule of all things it is hardly surprising that it gives birth to distorted ideologies – ideologies that have in large measure obscured the insights of classical medieval thought.

The classical perspective originated in Greece and Rome, and it was further developed within medieval institutions faith and learning. This long tradition produced a form of political thought that synthesized ancient philosophy and medieval theology. Thomas Aquinas is one of the ablest and most celebrated advocates of this tradition.

According to Thomas, man finds his purpose, meaning, and excellence by conforming to the order and design established by the wisdom of God.³ The natural law is that part of God’s wisdom (eternal law)

² Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” (1784) in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (Penguin Books, 1995), 1-7.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II. 94. 1-2. [Henceforth: ST]

that is knowable by the light of natural reason; the divine law is the revelation of eternal law in the Bible. This latter law is indispensable because it makes manifest not only those things knowable to natural reason, but also those saving truths that exceed what the human mind can know on its own. Man grows deeper in wisdom through faith. Christian wisdom teaches us that we live in a fallen world. This is true and evident to experience. But the fallen character of man and the natural world does not utterly destroy the goodness of creation. Although often obscured by sin and vice the ordered reality created by God remains. *The invisible things of God may be clearly seen from the visible things of creation* (Rom. 1). In this perspective, a rightly ordered political community is the wisdom of God made social and codified in law. Although this may strike modern readers as excessively theological, theologians like Thomas saw it as a synthesis of faith and reason that relied heavily on the designs and purposes embedded in nature and knowable by reason. Accordingly, just political order is natural and highly rational. Theology enriches the political order, but it does not replace it. Indeed, the political doctrine espoused by Thomas is primarily Aristotelian and thus turns on ideas related to classical virtue, natural purposes, and the nature of man, all of which, properly belong to philosophy.

Classical political thought was in large part swept away by modern ideologies, which continue to dominate political thought and imagination.

It is purpose of this work to analyze, define, and critique the major modern political ideologies in the light of classical political thought. Doing so is important for three reasons: (1) the refutation of error belongs to wisdom; (2) personal rectification; (3) preparing for a solution.

First, it belongs to wisdom to search out and teach the highest truths and to refute error.⁴ Errors concerning the highest causes deserve refutation because they mislead us in the most important matters. This task is not uncharitable. In fact disabusing our friends and neighbors of significant falsehoods is a work of mercy. In addition, the identification and refutation of error contributes to intellectual growth and development.

Second, if it is helpful to rescue our neighbor from error it is no less true for oneself. Modern men, born and raised in modern states are constantly besieged by ideology. Accordingly it is no surprise that even right thinking men sometimes adhere to political errors. For this reason, it is useful for self-correction to understand the origins, errors, and development of ideology.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, if there is any hope of political recovery, it is necessary to understand the sources of decline. The political decline of Western civilization did not happen

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.1. (SCG)

overnight and it did not come out of nowhere. To be sure, many factors conspired to undermine Western political culture, but the advent and development of misguided ideologies continues to play a decisive role. If these errors can be identified and consistently refuted, then recovery is possible – or at least evils may be diminished. To this end, chapter 1 begins with a systematic (but concise) exposition of classical political thought according to the mind of Thomas Aquinas. Chapters 2 through 8 will define and map the development of modern political ideas. Finally, in chapters 9, 10, 11, and 12, I shall explore and evaluate various ways of responding to the rise of ideology and indicate some practical solutions.

What follows will be largely critical, but it is hoped that it will contribute in some small way to the mission of Catholic Studies Academy: deepening and strengthening faith, through the systematic study of philosophy and theology. Recovering an adequate vision of political order is an important step in this process. To this end, the present work emphasizes clarity, accessibility, and concision. Accordingly, the account developed herein is intended to paint a picture in broad strokes. There is always more to say and further details to explore, and the reader is encouraged to go further in his own exploration. The goal is to bring to light fundamental ideas and the broad sweep of political thought. In this sense, the present book is synthetic and general. Those who prefer the analytic and minutely detailed may object

and the objection is well taken. Analyzing a subject matter into fine detail is very important; it is a necessary aspect of intellectual development. At the same time, synoptic vision is also an important and recurring moment in the endeavor to understand. Indeed, genuine learning often cycles between detailed analysis and synoptic vision. It is hoped that the synthesis developed herein will contribute to the real growth of its readers.

Sources and Further Reading

Plato, *The Republic*, c. 380, trans. G. Grube and C. Reeve (Hackett Publishing, 1992). See especially book II.

Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, sixth edition (Regnery Publishing, 2001), 3-27.