

Was Thomas Aquinas a Republican?

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INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION OF REGIME

If the question of regime or constitution is the central question of political science, as Aristotle thought and as citizens seem to believe, then it is a matter of some moment in studying the history of political thought to trace the rise and fall of prestige of regimes. Sketching the history of the West in rough outline, one might say that with the first emergence of political science in ancient Greece, the best regime was thought to be republican; the rise of Augustus in response to the collapse of the Roman republic in civil war might then be said to have initiated a millennium or more in which monarchy was the dominant regime; then in modern times, after a literary revival of classical republicanism, democracy became the standard against which countries measure their political order.

To think such a sketch important, indeed to ask the question of the best regime, is to adopt the perspective of classical political science rather than modern political philosophy. From at least the *Leviathan* of Thomas Hobbes, the moderns have treated the question of the form of government as secondary to the question of the power or extent of government. Not “who rules?,” but “how much?,” is seen as the chief political issue, with questions of the form of government treated as problems of institutional engineering. Not virtue, but liberty is seen as the end of politics, or rather, as the deepest value that more immediate political goals – protection of person and property, or peace and prosperity – ultimately serve. State and society are distinguished by the moderns, perhaps in the first place to liberate the former from the Church, but also to liberate the creation of wealth from the old political dispute over its distribution. It would be misleading to call the dynamic world socio-economic system of modern times planned, but not to call it wished for.

However transformative liberal political philosophy has been, its success does not in itself refute political analysis in terms of the regime. First of all, democratic citizens seem not to think so, but continue to praise democracy and appeal to what Aristotle long ago recognized as its principles, liberty and equality. Second, at least one modern political theorist of high standing – Alexis de Tocqueville – treats the dynamic character of modern society as the consequence of democracy, not as the creation of a mode of political life independent of regime. Third, Aristotle had thought the question of the regime central to political analysis because he thought human beings are naturally political, by which he meant that human happiness was best achieved living as part of a community given form by a political regime; since human beings by nature seek their good, according to Aristotle, political action in any era or circumstance would show some trace of the regime, whatever the dominant ideology of the age or whoever its dominant power. That modern political philosophy developed into modes of thought that encouraged the totalitarian deformations of the twentieth century seems rather to confirm than to refute the continued value of Aristotle’s approach.

Now if we proceed on the supposition that the regime—that is, the comprehensive form of political life of a city, defining who rules and thereby to what ends – is the decisive fact of political life, then the question of political science is complicated: How can the political analyst get outside the regime in order to assess it in clear light, not as its apologist or its enemy? Even if the mind can free itself of the presumptions of the regime, can one teach freely what one discovers? Who in our age expects to be taken seriously as a political scientist who is not, or who does not profess to be, a democrat, or perhaps one should say, a liberal democrat? Could Aristotle appear as anything but a republican? Could Thomas Aquinas, writing in the thirteenth century, appear as anything but a monarchist? That a skillful writer might be able to convey his genuine teaching while appearing to conform to the dominant opinions of his day is the supposition of the hermeneutic of esotericism. Not every writer may adopt this mode of expression – perhaps not every regime requires it – but not to be open to the possibility of esoteric writing is not to take seriously the question of the regime. Whether the subject of this study wrote in such a way will be discussed below.

REPUBLICANISM AND ARISTOTELIANISM

Was Thomas Aquinas a republican?¹ To ask this, it should now be clear, is to ask whether he thought republicanism describes the best political regime and whether in some manner he promoted it. Among the many hundreds of questions Aquinas asks and answers in his magisterial *Summa Theologica*, he never explicitly addresses the topic of the best regime or the topic of republicanism. But throughout the *Summa*, Aquinas takes Aristotle as his authority on the human sciences, and he certainly knew the distinction between monarchy, republic, and empire in the history of Rome. The regime question, then, is one that Aquinas might have – indeed, must have – asked himself, even if, because his topic is theology or because he sought no added trouble, he declined to be explicit in his greatest text. It is, moreover, a question central to the study of the history of late medieval and early modern political thought in Europe, the thought occasioned in some part by the translation of Aristotle’s *Politics* into Latin during Aquinas’s lifetime and its subsequent introduction into Western universities and discourse.²

¹ More commonly asked is the question whether Aquinas was “the first Whig,” something Lord Acton suggested years ago and that a number of writers have pursued. See Acton, “The History of Freedom in Christianity,” in J. Rufus Fears, ed., *Selected Writings of Lord Acton, Vol. I: Essays in the History of Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), p. 34 [online at <http://oll.libertyfund.org>]; Michael Novak, “Thomas Aquinas, the First Whig,” appendix to *This Hemisphere of Liberty: A Philosophy of the Americas* (Washington: AEI Press, 1992); and John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. ch. 7 & 8, where Aquinas’s position on the extent of state power is said to be “not readily distinguishable from the ‘grand simple principle’ ...of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*” (p. 228). But see, contra, the discussion of Acton, Novak, and others in Kenneth W. Craycraft, Jr., “Was Aquinas a Whig? St. Thomas on Regime,” in *Faith and Reason* (Fall 1994) [online at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/BUSINESS/FR94302.HTM>], and Stoner, “Was Thomas Aquinas the First Whig?,” paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 2, 2004, while the question of whether Aquinas was a Whig is self-consciously anachronistic, the question of whether Aquinas is a republican is one that he might have asked himself.

² On the history of the suppression and then reintroduction of Aristotle’s *Politics* in the West, see Ernest Fortin, “Politics and Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Aristotelian Revolution,” in J. Brian Benestad, ed., *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theological-Political Problem*

What is a republic? Antony Black has recently offered a useful two-part definition, in terms recognizable across the ages and still resonant today:

I will define *republic* (as an ideal type) to mean: (1) an institutional order in which rulers are elected and subject to law, major decisions are taken by groups, and the people are assigned some part in the polity; and (2) a political ethic according to which citizens have a duty to serve the common good and a right to fair and equal treatment by public authorities.³

Black applies this definition to a variety of Christian texts, from the early Church fathers through the Reformation, to show that “early Christianity contained elements of republicanism” and introduced the use of representatives, principally in Church governance.⁴ The gravamen of his argument is that Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock are mistaken to find the emergence of republicanism in the Renaissance in Machiavelli and others who are separate from and sometimes outright opposed to the Church; especially the rise of conciliarism in the Church at the same moment as the rise of self-governance in the Italian city-states shows that republican ideas belonged to the Christian mind as well as to classical revivalists. Even if Black’s suppositions about the permeability of ecclesiastical and political forms are correct – Tocqueville, too, argues that “every religion is to be found in juxtaposition to a political opinion which is connected with it by affinity”⁵ – they are of no use in proving Aquinas’s republicanism, for he allied himself with the popes of his day on questions of ecclesial authority. But affinity of ideas, as we will see, is not a sufficient ground for argument in Aquinas; he is willing to consider each matter in itself, to dissect its principles and establish its form.

Since Aquinas’s discussion of ethics and politics in the *Summa* closely tracks Aristotle’s, it makes sense to ask whether Aristotle himself was a republican, as most modern commentators have assumed him to be.⁶ To put the question that way is in a sense anachronistic: The paradigmatic republic for Western political thought was Rome, and Aristotle apparently knew nothing of the Romans, though they had sent to Athens for Solon’s laws when writing their own a hundred years or so before his time. But *respublica* can be seen as the Latin equivalent of the Greek term *politeia*, which I have translated as “regime” and which, following Cicero, subsequent tradition has translated as “republic” in the title to the dialogue by Plato.⁷ For Aristotle, *politeia* is both the generic

(Ernest L. Fortin: *Collected Essays*, vol. 2) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), ch. 9, esp. pp. 177-80.

³ Antony Black, “Christianity and Republicanism: From St. Cyprian to Rousseau,” *American Political Science Review* 91 (1997): 647.

⁴ *Ibid.*, at 650.

⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, tr. Henry Reeve, vol. I, ch. 17.

⁶ Fortin gives the date of William of Moerbeke’s translation of the *Politics* into Latin as the 1260s, the same decade during which Aquinas is known to have begun the *Summa*, though he doubts the translation was made at Aquinas’s request, *op. cit.*, pp. 180, 194. Citations to the *Politics* in the *Summa* are much less frequent than to the *Ethics*, but references can be found, e.g., *Summa Theologica*, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948), I, q. 96, a. 1, 4.

⁷ On the translation of *politeia* as “regime” and as “republic,” see Allan Bloom, tr., *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 439-40.

term for regime or constitution or form of government, and the specific name of a single type of *politeia*, rule by many for the common good.⁸ In fact, as a specific type of regime (let me translate the specific *politeia* as “polity”), Aristotle says it is best in most cases, as well as that a polity is a sort of mix of two faulty regimes (that is, regimes whose rulers seek their own rather than the common good), oligarchy and democracy, and that in a polity the middle class predominates.⁹ Polity clearly fits the criteria for republic quoted above; indeed, the Ciceronian translation might be the best for the specific form. The actual regime Aristotle discusses that best exemplifies polity is, ironically, Carthage, later the enemy, if in form somewhat the mirror, of Rome.¹⁰

Does Aristotle’s praise of polity make him a republican? Not exactly. Political science, he argues, ought to account not only for what regime is best in most cases, but also for what is best simply or best in the best circumstances one could wish for.¹¹ Better than the polity, capable of a more refined form of virtue, is kingship or aristocracy; which of these is superior depends on the number of supremely virtuous men the city contains. In primitive times, it is likely that only one man of superior virtue will appear in any city; this king will be their founder, and deserving of the gratitude of later generations. Usually in more advanced ages, one might hope for a class of virtuous aristocrats, willing to rule in their own name. Though at first Aristotle seems to treat the difference between kingship and aristocracy as accidental, dependent as it is on the number of available men of virtue, his subsequent discussion of kingship centers on the question of whether the rule of the best man or of the best laws is preferable.¹² Characteristically, he is clearer in presenting the arguments on either side – that, on the one hand, a living man is needed to address the particularities of circumstance, even to apply the law, but on the other hand that law is reason free from passion – than in judging between them, at least in any general way. Insofar as aristocracy is, like polity, governed by law, Aristotle’s republicanism seems generally secure, absent, that is, a supremely virtuous ruler.

The account of different regimes just summarized occurs principally in books three and four of the *Politics*. There is a slightly different account in book one. Within a few lines of the beginning of the book, Aristotle corrects those – some think he means Plato – who do not distinguish a small city and a large household and hence do not distinguish between the different kinds of rule appropriate to each: political, kingly, economic, despotic.¹³ He then says people hold untrue views about the difference between the kingly and the political, though translators differ over whether he means to reject or sustain the distinction he draws: between when one governs personally, and when one governs according to the rules of such a science and takes turns ruling and being ruled. Later in book one despotic rule (the rule of a master over slaves) is contrasted to political and kingly rule: in the first (despotic) mode the soul rules the body,

⁸ *Politics* III, 1279a39.

⁹ *Ibid.* IV, 1293b22 ff.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* II, 1272b24 ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.* IV, 1288b22 ff.

¹² *Ibid.* III, 1286a8 ff.

¹³ *Ibid.* I, 1252a7 ff.

in the second (political and kingly) intelligence rules the appetites.¹⁴ Finally, political and kingly rule are distinguished; they correspond to the rule of husband over wife (it being noted that, in contrast to true political rule, spouses don't take turns) and the rule of fathers over children, respectively.¹⁵ Although this is all a bit obscure, the contrast of the kingly with the political suggests the more modern distinction between the monarchical and the republican. Again, Aristotle pays a certain homage to the possibility of the kingship of the truly superior,¹⁶ while anchoring the political or republican in taking turns.

AQUINAS AS REPUBLICAN I: THE *SUMMA*

There are, to my knowledge, three principal texts in the many works of Aquinas that speak to the question of regime: a passage in the *Summa Theologica*, the short work *On Kingship to the King of Cyprus*, and the *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*. All three works are thought to be incomplete and in fact were expanded by his fellow Dominicans. The third not yet being available in English, I will confine my remarks below to the first two.¹⁷

The reader of the *Summa* can be excused for thinking that that text, insofar as it treats of politics, speaks the accents of monarchy. In the first part, addressing the question “of the mastership belonging to man in the state of innocence [i.e., before the Fall],” Aquinas describes what might be called – though Aquinas does not exactly say so – natural inequality: of sex, of age, of righteousness and knowledge in soul, of robustness, size, and beauty in body. Though slavery is not natural (here he differs from Aristotle), there would have been even in paradise the rule of some men over others, for man's being naturally social would have required “the presidency of one to look after the common good,” hence a kind of mastership over a free subject, “by directing him either towards his own proper welfare, or to the common good”; besides, “if one man surpassed another in knowledge and virtue, this would not have been fitting unless these gifts conduced to the benefit of all.”¹⁸ Later, Aquinas includes piety, observance, *dulia*, and obedience among the special virtues that belong to justice, and these all seem foreign to democratic ears. Piety is defined as “worship due to parents” and “worship given to our country,” both for having given us “birth and nourishment.” Observance is that “whereby worship and honor are paid to persons in positions of dignity,” such as “the governor of a state in civil matters, the commander of an army in matters of warfare, a professor in matters of learning,” and the like; *dulia*, a part of observance, refers to the external signs of honor given to a person above us, since “honor denotes a witnessing to a person's excellence.” Obedience is part of this hierarchy: “in virtue of the order of

¹⁴ *Ibid.* I, 1254b5-10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* I, 1259b1.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the importance of kingship in Aristotle, see Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., *Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power* (New York: Free Press, 1989), ch. 2-3.

¹⁷ But see the forthcoming *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, tr. Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2007).

¹⁸ *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 96, a. 3, 4. Notice in this last statement an anticipation, so to speak, of John Rawls's difference principle – cf. *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) – which suggests that already in Aquinas, departures from equality require justification.

natural and divine law, inferiors are bound to obey their superiors.”¹⁹ That all of this sounds strange to contemporary ears, so much so that some of the words are virtually unknown or assigned different meanings, only goes to prove how monarchical the concepts are – though we still speak of observing or obeying law, and we witness to those forms of excellence we honor, if not with “dulia,” then with “celebrity” or “prestige.”

If these passages condone and even honor inequality, and so seem monarchical or aristocratic rather than democratic or republican, it ought to be noted that Aquinas never endorses inequality or homage without immediately reiterating their limits. In the discussion of the state of innocence, as the quotations above make plain, Aquinas insists that inequality serve the common good or the benefit of all, not only the good of the advantaged. Obedience he limits in several ways, most famously by making clear in a well-known passage in the “Treatise on Law” that unjust laws “are acts of violence rather than laws” and do not bind in conscience, except in those circumstances where breaking even unjust human laws would cause scandal or disturbances.²⁰ That obedience due to persons as an aspect of observance is limited to the sphere of the superior’s authority, and so is bound from both above and below. Not only is man absolved from any obedience to a superior who would countermand the command of God, but:

...since by nature all men are equal, [man] is not bound to obey another man in matters touching the nature of the body, for instance in those relating to the support of the body or the begetting of his children. Wherefore servants are not bound to obey their masters, nor children their parents, in the question of contracting marriage or of remaining in the state of virginity or the like.²¹

Aquinas does not speak here of natural rights, but the concept seems well-formed. As for observance, the drift of the whole passage is away from homage paid to conventional superiors and towards respect for genuine excellence. Aquinas does not dispense from the former in the absence of the latter, but he clearly means that superiors ought to earn their privileges through their virtues.

The one explicit treatment of the political regime in the *Summa* arises in a somewhat roundabout but unavoidable way. In the “Treatise on Law,” considering divine law, and more precisely the Old Law, Aquinas raises the question of its good order; establishing first that the Ten Commandments are more or less coincident with the natural law and comprise morality, and next that the ceremonial precepts were reasonable in their time and place but without force after the coming of Christ, he then sets out to explain and defend the various “judicial precepts” of the Old Law, and first among these the “precepts concerning rulers.” Here he defends the constitution of ancient Israel, from the promulgation of Mosaic law to the Babylonian captivity. He rejects the argument from analogy or affinity to God’s kingship – the objection that “the best ordering of a state or of any nation is to be ruled by a king: because this kind of government

¹⁹ *Summa*, II-II, q. 101, a. 1; q. 102, a. 2; q. 103, a. 1-2, q. 104, a.1.

²⁰ *Summa*, I-II, q. 96, a. 4. Unjust laws that violate one’s duties to God are to be disobeyed without qualification.

²¹ *Summa*, II-II, q. 104, a. 5.

approaches nearest in resemblance to the Divine government, whereby God rules the world from the beginning” – and instead cites Aristotle’s *Politics* for two basic principles: first, that “all should take some share in the government,”²² and second, that among constitutions, “the first place is held by kingdom... and aristocracy.” He sums up his conclusion as follows:

Accordingly, the best form of government is in a state or kingdom, wherein one is given the power to preside over all; while under him are others having governing powers; and yet a government of this kind is shared by all, both because all are eligible to govern, and because the rules [rulers?] are chosen by all. For this is the best form of polity, being partly kingdom, since there is one at the head of all; partly aristocracy, in so far as a number of persons are set in authority; partly democracy, i.e., government by the people, in so far as the rulers can be chosen from the people, and the people have the right to choose their rulers.²³

The best government, then, is a mixed regime, writes Aquinas, and he proceeds to show how the government of the ancient Israelites can be interpreted according to this model. Two elements are relatively easy to fit to the model: the seventy-two elders hold the place of the aristocracy, and the people are the source from whom the rulers are chosen. More difficult to explain are the character of the royal element and the role of the people in actually choosing their rulers. Concerning the first, Aquinas proceeds in several steps, moving from his initial answer through the replies to several objections. In the first place, the judges take the place of kings: “Moses and his successors governed the people in such a way that each of them was ruler over all; so that there was a kind of kingdom.” In the second place, as becomes evident in the reply to the first objection, their election was unique: “The Lord did not leave the choice of a king [i.e., Joshua, etc.] to the people; but reserved this to Himself...” Moreover, commenting on the inclination of the Jews of the time to cruelty and avarice, “which vices above all turn men into tyrants,” Aquinas explains, “from the very first the Lord did not set up the kingly authority with full power, but gave them judges and governors to rule them.” Finally, of course, the people insist on a full king and the Lord relents, Aquinas quoting the passage from the Bible in which, speaking to Samuel, God reveals another interpretation of the kingly power in the original government: ““They have not rejected thee, but Me, that I should not reign over them.””²⁴ In the subsequent replies to objections within the same article Aquinas notes more particularly the divine law regarding kings: that their election

²² *Summa*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1. The citation is to *Politics* II.6, Aristotle’s critique of the Spartan constitution, which includes, however, this one sentence of praise: “...this office [of ephor] does, it is true, hold together the constitution – for the common people keep quiet because they have a share in the highest office of the state, so that owing to the lawgiver’s foresight, or else to accident, the Ephorate is advantageous for the conduct of affairs; for if a constitution is to be preserved, all the sections of the state must wish it to exist and to continue on the same lines; so the kings are in this frame of mind owing to their honourable rank, the nobility owing to the office of the Elders, which is a prize of virtue, and the common people because of the Ephorate, which is appointed from the whole population....” (The translation is by H. Rackham in the Loeb edition [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972], pp. 141-43 [1270b18-27].)

²³ *Summa*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1. The correction to the Dominican Fathers translation has been suggested by one scholar and seems supported by the Latin.

²⁴ I Samuel 8:7.

was to wait for “the Lord’s decision,” that a king should be of their own nation, that kings were to be limited to moderate wealth and ordered to be just, “that they should continually read and ponder on God’s Law, and should ever fear and obey God,” and the like. As for the remainder of the eighth chapter of Samuel, in which the prophet foretells the harm a king would do, Aquinas makes clear that this describes usurpation and tyranny, though he does caution “that even a good king, without being a tyrant, may take away the sons, and make them tribunes and centurions, may take many things from his subjects in order to secure the common weal.”

As an account of the best regime, then, this passage is more than a little troublesome. That even the theoretical sketch purportedly drawn from Aristotle is a modification of Aristotle’s account of the mixed regime, which stressed the mix of rich and poor classes, was noted by James Blythe, author of an important book on mixed government in the middle ages,²⁵ but he overlooks that Aquinas is drawing on the account of Sparta in *Politics* II, not the account of the mixed regime in *Politics* IV. More serious, I think, is the way in which the application of the model serves to interpret it, not least because the context of the whole discussion – the reason of the Old Law – is taken from the application, not the model in itself. Among the parts of the mixed regime, the kingly is clearly the most problematic: modified over time, constrained in various ways, at once reflective of God’s kingship and the result of its rejection by the people, whose opinion even God seems resigned to take into account. Moreover, the introduction of the Greek ideal to explain the ancient Hebrew constitution, begs the question of what either means for Christians. In the *Summa*, after all, the discussion of the Old Law is followed by a discussion of the New, which contains no account of a new best regime and describes its subject as a “law of liberty,” where external acts “have been left by the Lawgiver, i.e. Christ, to the discretion of each individual.”²⁶

Now man is placed between the things of this world, and spiritual goods wherein eternal happiness consists: so the more he cleaves to the one, the more he withdraws from the other, and conversely.... Nevertheless, for man to gain the end aforesaid, he does not need to renounce the things of the world altogether: since he can, while using the things of this world, attain to eternal happiness, provided he does not place his end in them: but he will attain more speedily thereto by giving up the goods of this world entirely....²⁷

The reader of this passage will not be surprised that the Second Part of the *Summa* – more precisely, the Second Part of the Second Part – concludes with an account of the religious life, nor that that account will include discussion of “different states in the Church,” or in other words, the Church’s order of rulers or constitution. There is no parallel account of the constitution, or the best constitution, of a State.

²⁵ James M. Blythe, “The Mixed Constitution and the Distinction Between Regal and Political Power in the Work of Thomas Aquinas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986): 547-65.

²⁶ *Summa*, I-II, q. 108, a. 1.

²⁷ *Summa*, I-II, q. 108, a. 4.

In what sense, if any, then, can Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa* be said to be republican? To be a republican in an age of monarchy is to be a revolutionary, and of course Aquinas was no such thing, at least at the level of practice. He states boldly his condemnation of tyranny, like a republican, but he also distinguishes the true king from the tyrant – though by the republican principle of devotion to the common good. By insisting that the best regime include a role for the people – albeit on the ground of necessity, lest they ruin it by disloyalty, rather than because they have something positive to contribute²⁸ – Aquinas moves beyond the constitutional monarchy characteristic of feudal Europe in the direction of the ancient city, indeed in the direction of the Greeks rather than the Hebrews. As everyone who reads Aquinas notices, his whole treatment of morality in the *Summa* is suffused with the spirit of law – his account of natural law and its relation to divine and human law is today usually seen as his distinctive contribution to Western political thought – and insofar as government by law is republican, as later Rousseau and Kant will say and as Aristotle, in his discussion of kingship, implied, Aquinas seems to encourage republicanism. But Aquinas’s emphasis on law is only the other side of his emphasis on human action, on the whole range of virtues that inform action, and on conscience as its witness and its judge. His account of these things at once points back to classical accounts of man and, in the discussion of conscience and of the centrality of charity, points beyond them. In the *Summa* at least he cannot be said to work out the full implications of his psychology and morality for political science, but he might be said to have planted the seeds of republicanism, or of a new kind of politics republican enough to insist on virtue and to aspire to common good.

AQUINAS AS REPUBLICAN II: *ON KINGSHIP*

If the *Summa Theologica* seems an unlikely place to look for political republicanism, the little treatise entitled *On Kingship* might seem even more so. The literary character of the work and its spirit seem far from the *Summa*: gone is the formalism of objections, authorities, answers, and replies, and instead the author writes as if to the audience of a single reader, implied by the title to be the actual king of Cyprus, though he goes unnamed. *On Kingship* has two books, described by its modern editor as discussing the theory and practice of kingship, respectively. This is a useful interpretation, though it does not explain why Aquinas saves the discussion of the papacy and the Church in relation to kings until book two. Aquinas himself, in the chapter that concludes the first book, says it has been about “what a king is, that it is good for the multitude to have a king, and also that it is expedient for a ruler to conduct himself towards the multitude of his subjects as a king, not a tyrant.” Book two, by contrast, is about “what the kingly office is, and what qualities the king should have.”²⁹ Yet even this is perplexing, for book two begins with the most purely theoretical account of kingship in the work: the king “is to be in the kingdom what the soul is in the body, and

²⁸ See Blythe, *op. cit.*, p. 558: “Aristotle never takes up Aristotle’s views on the collective wisdom of the whole multitude, and there is no reason to think he shares them.” Leaving aside the question of whether Aristotle himself shares this argument he collects – he pairs it, after all, with the argument that the one expert knows best (*Politics* 12xxx) – one might speculate that Aquinas is unwilling to promote the case for collective wisdom lest it undermine the authority of doctrine in the Church.

²⁹ *On Kingship to the King of Cyprus*, tr. Gerald B. Phelan, rev. with intro. by I. Th. Eschmann, O.P. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949), bk. I, ch. 12, p. 52; bk. II, ch. 1, p. 53.

what God is in the world,” and this because “reason is to man what God is to the world.” In other words,

Since... man is by nature a social animal living in a multitude..., the analogy with the divine government is found in him not only in this way that one man governs himself by reason, but also in that the multitude of men is governed by the reason of one man.³⁰

Actually, the analogy ought perhaps to be seen as practical rather than theoretical, reminding the king of the magnitude of his office or duty – to show “zeal for justice,” and to acquire “the gentleness of clemency and mildness” – for theoretically it shows the problem of kingship: A king purports to think for other men who can very well think for themselves.

A full commentary on even so short a book – 20 chapters, only a couple pages each – is beyond the scope of this paper, but a few additional general observations are in order. First, if the *Summa* turns toward the Church and religious life in its account of human perfection, the focus here is on the worldly king. The frank and clear discussion of the relation of Church and State, or more precisely of pope and king, puts the political in its place. If man’s end were to be found in this life, political life would be self-sufficient, for Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that “society must have the same end as the individual man” and that “virtuous life is the end for which men gather together.” But since there is a higher end for man, “final beatitude which is looked for after death in the enjoyment of God,” then “it is not the ultimate end of the assembled multitude to live virtuously, but through virtuous living to attain to the possession of God.” This no human politics can achieve: “because a man does not attain his end, which is the possession of God, by human power but by divine..., the task of leading him to that last end does not pertain to human but to divine government.” Nor is this latter abstract and invisible:

In order that spiritual things might be distinguished from earthly things, the ministry of this kingdom has been entrusted not to earthly kings but to priests, and most of all to the chief priest, the successor of St. Peter, the Vicar of Christ, the Roman Pontiff. To him all the kings of the Christian People are to be subject as to our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. For those to whom pertains the care of intermediate ends should be subject to him to whom pertains the care of the ultimate end, and be directed by his rule.³¹

Still, if the king is subject to the clergy on spiritual matters and if his own promotion of the good life on earth should keep one eye on heaven – “that is to say, he should command those things which lead to the happiness of Heaven and, as far as possible, forbid the contrary” – he nevertheless has his own goods to ordain, particularly “whatever particular goods are procured by man’s agency – whether wealth, profits, health, eloquence, or learning –” and his own ends to seek: the unity of peace, virtuous action on

³⁰ *Ibid.*, bk. II, ch. 1, p. 54.

³¹ *Ibid.*, bk. II, ch. 3, pp. 60-62.

the part of the people, and “a sufficient supply of the things required for proper living.”³² The concluding chapters of the book examine this last category, drawing on the later books of Aristotle’s *Politics* and explicitly invoking his authority. Indeed, *On Kingship* is thought incomplete precisely because it concludes with chapters on the procurement of food, the limitation of trade, and the selection of a beautiful site:

It is ...harmful to a city to superabound in delightful things, whether it be on account of its situation or from whatever other cause. However, in human intercourse it is best to have a moderate amount of pleasure as a spice of life, so to speak, wherein man’s mind may find some recreation.³³

Not considered by the commentators is that a little book meant to teach moderation to kings that they not become tyrants could have no more fitting end. Nor does a concern for the otherworldly dominate the first book of *On Kingship*: At one point, Aquinas writes matter-of-factly that “it is too great a virtue for the common man to love his enemies and to do good to his persecutors.” Though this is not inconsistent with his treatment of the New Law in the *Summa*, where counsels of perfection are distinguished from moral commands, it is nevertheless striking evidence of Aquinas’s Aristotelian mood here; if not presuming to correct the Sermon on the Mount, he nevertheless cautions those who think political life can be conducted solely on its terms.³⁴

The distinction between king and tyrant is the chief topic of book one. The context seems entirely Aristotelian, at least at first. The six regimes paradigmatic in *Politics* III are presented, distinguished according to number (one, few, or many) and end (for the common good or the ruler’s advantage). Aquinas concentrates on kingship and tyranny, indeed already by chapter three denouncing tyranny as the worst regime. The second half of book one is concerned with preventing the king from becoming a tyrant. Aquinas does not specify precisely how this is to be done: the right man must be chosen in the first place, and scholars speculate that his assertion that “the government of the kingdom must be so arranged that the opportunity to tyrannize is removed” refers to establishment of a mixed regime on the model of the *Summa*.³⁵ Should a king become a tyrant, Aquinas rejects tyrannicide – it is against apostolic teaching, he says, though he notes that many men promote it – but recourse can be had to higher power: an elected king can be deposed by those who elected him, a higher authority such as an emperor might step in, or God himself might be called upon, presumably in prayer. Most of the chapters concern the incentives that can be presented to the king considering tyranny. On the one hand, a good king not only wins earthly glory, or at least avoids infamy for greed, cruelty, and lust, but also, since “all earthly things are beneath the human mind,” he will be rewarded by God with eternal happiness, even in “an elevated and outstanding degree,” since “greater virtue is required to rule a household than to rule one’s self, and much greater to rule a kingdom and a city.”³⁶ On the other hand, the tyrant can be

³² *Ibid.*, bk. II, ch. 4, pp. 63-65.

³³ *Ibid.*, bk. II, ch. 8, p. 80.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, bk. I, ch. 10, p. 45. Cf. *Summa*, II-II, q. 184, esp. a. 3.

³⁵ *On Kingship*, bk. I, ch. 6, p. 24 and note 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, bk I, ch. 7-9, esp. pp. 36-37, 39.

assured of misery here and now – he will lose friendship, stability, and maybe even his life – and he can be certain of eternal damnation.

If tyranny is the worst regime, is kingship the best? From the account of the six regimes in chapter one, which tracks Aristotle almost exactly, it might seem that the competitor to kingship would be aristocracy, which was defined as rule by a few men of virtue for the common good, while kingship is rule by only one, but in chapter two, Aquinas poses the question as rule by one or by many – making polity apparently the competitor. Defining the unity of peace as the chief concern of the ruler insures the priority of kingship, as more apt to unity, though a reiteration of the same argument through an analogy to men pulling a boat and so needing unity of direction quietly suggests that ruling might sometimes require more strength than a single man can supply. The third argument, from nature, is also qualified: the body is moved by one heart, the soul by one reason, but the proposition that artificial things ought to imitate natural things is introduced with an “if.” That kingship can degenerate into tyranny quickly becomes an argument against it, at least in the minds of most men, leading Aquinas to introduce a new distinction between tyranny, where the tyrant “obstructs one or the other individual interest of his subjects,” and “an excess of tyranny [where] the tyrant rages against the whole community.”³⁷ Now comparing kingship to aristocracy, which he renames “polyarchy” and finds prone to dissension and itself to degeneracy into tyranny, he seems to suggest that, if “excess of tyranny” is admittedly the worst regime, ordinary tyranny can be accommodated and corrected, perhaps by the sorts of appeals mentioned above.

In the course of making the case for kingship, Aquinas speaks of the Roman republic and cites Sallust’s testimony as to the growth and strength of Rome after the kingdom was changed into aristocracy. He explains this development as follows:

men living under a king strive more sluggishly for the common good, inasmuch as they consider that what they devote to the common good, they do not confer upon themselves but upon another, under whose power they see the common goods to be. But when they see that the common good is not under the power of one man, they do not attend to it as if it belonged to another, but each one attends to it as if it were his own.³⁸

It is hard to imagine a stronger argument in favor of republicanism, and while a paragraph or two later Aquinas proceeds to discuss the later dissensions among the Romans that grew into civil wars, the point has been made – and underlined, ironically, by its omission in the summary at the end of the chapter. To be sure, there is nothing to suggest that Aquinas sees military power or economic opulence as the measure of political success; on the contrary, as indicated by the passage on the final page quoted above, he seems eager to settle for a middle course, though at the outset of the treatise he quietly goes beyond Aristotle in the account of the growth of political forms from household, to village (neighborhood), to city, on to province, “because of the need of

³⁷ *Ibid.*, bk. I, ch. 5, p. 21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, bk. I, ch. 4, p. 19.

fighting together and mutual help against enemies.”³⁹ But no Aristotelian praises sluggishness over activity. Among the impediments to the public good listed in book two is “the perversity in the wills of men, inasmuch as they are either too lazy to perform what the commonweal demands, or, still further, they are harmful to the peace of the multitude because, by transgressing justice, they disturb the peace of others.” Republicanism addresses the first challenge: that, rationally or irrationally, men resist being ruled by others, even as the passions resist being ruled by reason. The question is whether, in setting men free to make the state their own, their inevitable disagreements can be resolved or contained.

CONCLUSION: IRONIC KINGSHIP

There is, then, even in the most unlikely of places, indication of Aquinas’s potential sympathy with the republican cause, not, perhaps, as revolutionary, but almost certainly as a way of mixing and modifying monarchical regimes. That this is something he could not have said more openly seems clear enough: on the one hand monarchs would not have tolerated it, while on the other the civil freedom he seemed ready to encourage might have prompted doctrinal confusion or dissension that he would have considered it his duty not to foster if extended from civil matters to religious ones. Still, if Aquinas’s great project was to bring doctrinal unity to the Church by appealing to philosophy as a help to the authority of Scripture and tradition, he could hardly have been an enemy of republican debate; his treatises themselves are full of debate, not only posing and answering questions, but raising and addressing objections of every sort. Writing of irony, the vice of belittling oneself that is a sort of deficiency as regards truth-telling, Aquinas says that it is no sin to be ironic “so as to safeguard truth, as when a man conceals the greater things in himself, but discovers and asserts lesser things of himself the presence of which in himself he perceives.”⁴⁰ As I hope to have shown, Aquinas was an ironic defender of kingship – and open to the claim of republicanism to better summon human virtue and allow human beings to live more fully in the light of the truth.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, bk. I, ch. 1, p. 10; cf. *Politics* I, 1252a21-1253a19.

⁴⁰ *Summa*, II-II, q. 113, a.1.