

A Brief Summary of My Research into the Origins of Medieval Political Philosophy

In undertaking this project, I set out to examine the genesis of the particular strain of philosophy that is associated with the medieval Christian scholastics. This philosophy, as found in the political works of Dante Alighieri and St. Thomas Aquinas, is defined in large part by its strong arguments for centralizing political power within a monarchy. However, it is also defined by the positive stance it takes towards the concept of politics. Unlike those political works descending from the thought of St. Augustine, this later political philosophy argues that political life is not only natural, but in some sense necessary for the good of all of humanity.

I started with Dante's 14th century work *On Monarchy*, which proposes ideas about the purpose of a monarch, the origins of the Roman right to monarchy, and the relationship between the Roman Monarch and the Roman Pontiff. While not a particularly well-known text, especially compared to Dante's other works, it presents a robust positive argument for the necessity of a monarchy that encompasses the entirety of humanity from both philosophical and theological perspectives. From there, I turned to St. Thomas Aquinas's *On the Government of Rulers* which presents a briefer, but similarly robust argument for monarchy. Unlike Dante, whose purpose is to justify a particular monarchy (The Holy Roman Empire), Aquinas puts forth more general arguments justifying monarchy and prescribing the behaviour of a monarch and does not argue for a global or universal monarchy.

After a brief digression to read about friendship – a reoccurring topic in both Dante and Aquinas - in books VIII and IX of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, I turned next to some works of early Christian monastic thought. I had a hunch that there would be parallels between the theory of political organization discussed by the two medieval thinkers and the much older

practice of organizing monastic communities. In my reading of St. Benedict of Nursia's *Rule* and the first two of John Cassian's *Conferences of the Desert Fathers* I began to see that my hunch may be correct. There are interesting philosophical and rhetorical similarities between the monastic and the medieval texts that suggest there exists between them a lineage of shared thinking. Now, at the end of this project, I have come to believe that the political thought of Dante and Aquinas were influenced by not only the medieval rediscovery of Aristotelian political and ethical theory in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but also the lingering influence of western monastic thinking.

To understand this thesis that I have begun to formulate, one must first understand the traditional narrative on how Aquinas formed his political theories. According to R.W. Dyson, translator and commentator of the Cambridge anthology of Aquinas's political writings, there is a divide between the political thought of St. Augustine and that of Aquinas. Expressed simply, Augustine's politics are pessimistic while Aquinas's are far more optimistic. For Augustine, political life is a sad necessity created by the fall of man, one that humanity is ill equipped by our nature to cope with. The justice and peace that earthly cities offer are merely pale shades of true justice and peace which are only available in the heavenly city of God and can only serve to keep a lid on our sinful natures. Earthly political life is essentially a punishment for original sin as it cannot elevate humanity to the state of Grace necessary for entrance into the City of God. Writing nearly a thousand years later, Aquinas's view is markedly more positive, as he argues that earthly politics are not inherently vicious, but that the earthly goods they can provide are not necessarily vicious either. For instance, just rulers can rule their states in a fashion that will habituate their subjects to justice, which is a necessary prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom

of Heaven. This positive view is replicated again and amplified in Dante, indicating a shift in Christian political philosophy between Augustine and Aquinas.

Dyson presents the rediscovery of Aristotle as the cause of this change. Aristotle's *Politics* and *Ethics* view the earthly world far more positively than Augustine's more platonic worldview does. Aquinas dedicated much of his career to rehabilitating the newly rediscovered Aristotelian philosophy by synthesizing this work with Catholic doctrine, so it is reasonable to see the connection between this shift in political thought and his work on Aristotle. Over the course of my research, I have come to conclude that missing from this conventional narrative is the role that monastic philosophy may have played in this shift towards a more positive politics.

The evidence to support this claim can be found in both the broad strokes of each text and the more particular arguments they employ. For instance, both kinds of texts – medieval political and early medieval – the aim of organizing a community is to create the space for the individual members of that community to attain their good. In the monastery, this good is defined as 'purity of heart' by Cassian while Dante defines the good of the kingdom as peace. Likewise, these are both immediate ends that themselves point at and enable more final ones. Purity of heart is a necessity for attaining eternal life in Christ while peace is a necessity for those in a kingdom to seek the same final end. One could even go so far as to justify the claim that purity of heart and peace are analogous concepts differentiated by scale by pointing out that Cassian uses the phrase 'peace of mind' more or less interchangeably with purity of heart. While there is undoubtedly Aristotelian influences in both Benedict's *Rule* and Cassian's *Conferences*, I am not sure that this distinct similarity in thinking is attributable to the influence of his philosophy alone.

Further justifying my thesis is the notable similarity in the proper behavior of an Abbot in the *Rule* and the prescribed behaviour of a king in *On Monarchy* and especially in *On the*

Government of Rulers. Both men are placed over their community on the basis of superlative spiritual virtue and they are obliged to act selflessly towards the end of improving the lives of those they are responsible for. While the Abbot is a far more immediate force in the lives of his flock than a king is in those of his subjects, they are both to act without regard to personal gain. They are to live as a sort of servant for their people, not caring for personal, material gain. Likewise, the reasons for placing a single ruler over the community are similar in both cases, although this is likely the lingering influence of Aristotle in both cases more so than anything else. More importantly, that the Abbot can have a positive influence over his flock is again the monastic thought justifying earthly political organization towards final, heavenly ends. That the king fills this same role, not just being an Aristotelian style Good Ruler but an instrument of divine providence, may be evidence to support my thesis.

By way of concluding this all to brief summary of my thoughts on this project, I want to thank the College for affording me the opportunity to undertake this research at all. Having now written this summary, I intend to write a longer paper that includes a more comprehensive argument for my thesis. Further, I hope to continue this line of inquiry or perhaps pursue some of the digressions that arose during my research in my future graduate studies.