

Capitalism and Morality

AQUINAS AND LOCKE: POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Among the great political philosophers of Medieval and Modern times are Thomas Aquinas and John Locke. They set the stage for many Contemporary thinkers of the day. Their teachings can be similar but also vary from point to point. Among their great works are their thoughts on the civil society. Each places emphasis on what they believe the purpose of the state is, natural law, natural rights, private property, formation of the state, divine/eternal laws, and the toleration of a tyrant. They do not, however agree perfectly on all these subjects nor focus the same amounts. Yet, these are crucial topics in their political philosophy.

Aquinas and Locke have similar definitions for what they believe the purpose of the state is. Aquinas believes the purpose of the state is to protect the common good by “keeping the peace, by organizing and harmonizing the activities of citizens, by providing for the resources to sustain life, and precluding or thwarting obstacles and hindrances to the good life.” (Thomas Aquinas’, 4) While Locke in his *The Second Treatise of Government*, he “explains that the function of legitimate civil government is to preserve the rights of life, liberty, health, and property of citizens and to prosecute and punish those who violate the right of others.” (John Locke’s, 4) In other words, both support that the purpose of government is to protect the peace of the citizens.

Neither philosopher argues for only one type of law. The first kind of law they both advocate for is natural law which is prior to human ordinances. Aquinas’s natural law is based on the precept that the good is to be done while evil should be avoided. Since natural law is prior and above human ordinances it plays a crucial restraint on abuse of power by the ruler and also guarantees that justice will be observed. If there is a political act that doesn’t follow natural law it is considered as violence. The principles of natural law are grasped through a habit or disposition where humans understand the first principles of morals and natural law. In other words, it is through practice and depends on each individual to what degree they understand natural law. Aquinas holds that the first principle of natural law is universally known. The problem arises when he speaks of the secondary or derived principles that are not universally apprehended to be certain and self-evident. Aquinas does not address the question on how to differentiate between these laws and human laws. He does provide two principles of natural law that are universal. They are to shun ignorance and to avoid offending those with whom one who lives. The first relates back to wanting to know the truth about God while the second deals with sociability. There are many others that can be derived based on man’s reason. Like Aquinas, Locke describes that natural law can be discovered by reason alone. Man, in the state of nature uses reason to determine moral law. The only rule in the state of nature is the law of nature. Natural law regulates all actions. One might run into a problem when understanding Locke’s position on the ground of natural law. There are two positions the “voluntarism-intellectualism” or the “voluntarist-rationalist”. The voluntarist follows that right and wrong are determined by the will of God. If this is not true then God becomes unessential since morality can be

described without God. The intellectualist disagrees with this argument because if morality is arbitrary then there would be no reason to follow God. Although, Locke is unclear at this point, it can be safe to assume he wanted to avoid natural law as being arbitrary. Locke is not as straight forward as Aquinas on what natural law requires but one can determine that Locke wants mankind to be preserved through natural law.

To branch off from natural law is natural rights. Aquinas does not place as much emphasis on natural rights as did Locke. In fact, Aquinas does not see natural rights as rights that individual's or groups claim they naturally have to go against others especially their rulers. Aquinas's definition of rights even strays from the American term. For him, law and rights are linked. "A right is the good at which justice and the acts of the just man aim." (Dowley 529) Law, then, is merely the "written expression" (Dowley 529) of right. A right is only another way of looking at one's duty or obligation. Locke, on the other hand, writes that natural rights are part of the state of nature. In opposition to Aquinas, Locke saw natural rights as emphasized privileges or claims that people are entitled to. Natural rights are based on religion. They are attributes and correlative duties to each human being. The three basic rights are the right to life, liberty, and estate. It is God that creates all and all humans need to protect God's property. Locke was an advocate of individual rights. Reason gave people free will but no one had the right to violate another's right. He also taught that all men are metaphysically equal but not in talents. They are equal in that they are gifts from God with a right to choose how they live their lives.

Just as important as natural law and natural rights is the right to private property. Aquinas and Locke are firm believers that it is necessary to have private property under natural law. Aquinas points out that private property is not a contradiction of natural law because reason derives the benefits of private property. Creativity and individual's liberty of action needs private property even if there is an unequal distribution of property. Yet, even if this occurs, the goods used must be in common to serve the common good. Private property also encourages responsibility and a peaceful state. Men take better care of the things that they possess than the things that are held in common by all or many others. It is therefore, more beneficial to have private property. Locke takes a very strong view on private property as being corollary to the right of life. Like Aquinas, Locke saw that through man's reason he could make use of property. To achieve private property man must put his labor into it. Locke wanted greater productivity because it would raise the standard of living. Cultivating and enclosing land makes land more productive, thus benefiting the whole community. To stop man from excessively taking private property, Locke sets a limit to the amount of private property a man can take in the state of nature. He says that man is to avoid spoilage or in other words take only as much private property as he can use. Thus, both men saw private property as a way for man take better care for what he was given in the state of nature.

When discussing the actual formation of the state Locke goes into more detail, regarding the state of nature, than Aquinas does. Both think consent is crucial when forming a government. In addition, they accept as true that all men are born equally. To explain let's look at each individually. Aquinas taught that from the state of nature of man derives the state not from man's corruption and sin. Aquinas noticed that man is created equally with liberty although man's talents and capacities create wide inequalities. He taught all men to respect and have a mutual exchange for the sake of a good life. Man is a social political animal whose nature fixes and determines his end.

Since, natural law is before civil jurisdiction; it is apparent that an end for mankind is to be in communion with others. Then, it follows that an end to the community is to respect the personhood of all its members. Even in the state of perfection, to provide direction and guidance it needs a ruler. However, one can only get power to create laws if the community rationally acts and consents to give this power. The state must respect the person's ability to reflect and choose so political legitimacy comes from all the citizens choosing their leaders. Then there is Locke, who begins his discussion of the formation of the state with the state of nature. Locke's state of nature is a state of freedom that was generally pleasant

where man used reason and tolerance. In the state of nature, all human beings are equal of all other human beings. The state of nature is neither a political society nor a state of war, but rather a state where people abide by the law of reason. Man uses this reason to realize no one ought to harm another. For this reason, each man is his own executioner of the law to punish wrong doers who infringe on the state of nature of him and the rest of society. The wrong doer is unfit to associate with others and threatens all of mankind. Yet, there is a defect of the state of nature because it has no organization to give effect to the rules of right. That is why man chooses to leave the state of nature for civil government. A civil government can better secure man's natural rights. In Locke's opinion, consent creates political right. One can understand this when Locke describes that men join civil societies voluntarily. In other words, voluntary agreement gives political power to governors for the sake of the subjects. With this power, the governors are required to secure the people's property or enforce natural law and rights. He does not argue against God appointing moral and political ends in the form of natural law and rights. Instead, he believes that men must appoint a "known and indifferent judge" (Riley 136) who will enforce what God has set up. Men have to appoint this judge since there is no natural political authority. When consenting to political societies, special obligations come about that men must follow since, they voluntarily agreed to them. Once agreeing to join the state, their consent is permanent. This is because men receive the benefits of a civil society but may revoke their consent in times of trouble or war. If all men did this then the political community would fail. Aquinas and Locke think it is only natural for man to join civil societies.

Both men agree that the government is limited in its power. Furthermore, both state that mixed regimes make the best regimes. Aquinas, like Locke, teaches that the political community is responsible to God. Moreover, he believes that reason constructs the political community, and that it receives its authority by God, himself. Aquinas was a supporter for a mixed regime that is limited by moral law and legal or constitutional devices. This regime requires consent and moral freedom, while minimizing the possibility of a tyrant. It would also allow all to believe they have say in the community. To switch to Locke, he believes in a civil government there must be a known and impartial judge who will determine all differences according to the established law. The established law is received and permitted by common consent of right and wrong. When setting up the government each man must follow the majority rule. Once a man joins the civil society, he cannot leave the society or chose not to follow the majority rule. Locke was a defender of democracy of the majority, since it is less likely to threaten individual's rights than a monarchist absolutism. Locke, like Aquinas, teaches that the main powers of government need to be separated between the people who make the laws, legislative, and who execute the laws, executive. Legislative have more power than the executive, but moral law, constitutional traditions, and conventions limit both. The legislative is a representational to the people and ought to be up for periodic re-election. The other divisions is federative power that are in the same hands as executive which protects peace, order, and especially security of property which is why people join civil society. When men join a civil government, they are not giving up their natural rights but just their power to enforce the law of nature. To protect the individual's natural rights he/she creates a political state since they are better equipped to protect natural justice. Civil societies do away with the inconveniences of the state of nature.

Once a civil society forms, they must establish laws. Aquinas, along with Locke distinguishes between the different types of laws. As discussed early, natural laws exists even before the civil society is established. The other types include divine/eternal law, and human/positive laws. Aquinas can be pessimistic when referring to the purpose of laws. Laws are to safeguard the innocent while placing fear in the wicked with punishment. Yet, Aquinas points out the positive role of law to the development of the human person and virtues. Both men place God as the supreme judge when determining laws. Aquinas preaches that all law bases itself on divine reason. The highest law is eternal law. Other laws follow eternal law. The government has limits to which they can go. They have to follow human nature and God's laws. Positive laws have to be consistent with man's nature. If a law goes against divine law, it must be broken. By obeying this human law would keep public order but at the cost of losing eternal beatitude. Locke's theory is similar to Aquinas's that before positive laws are God's laws. They exist

whether the state exists or not. Natural law creates moral obligations that are valid whether held by the government or not. Positive laws only create a way to enforce natural law. Ethics is the base for Locke's political theory. There must be a lawgiver in the state of nature and that is God. If one chooses to break God's law, they will be punished in this world and the next. Although Locke places God, above all other judges he does not want government to force people into a certain religion.

What happens when a government does not follow the divine laws or the laws of nature, and a tyrant emerges? Both men agree this is the worse type of regime, but have different approaches to rid the citizens of it. Aquinas can be tolerable to the tyrant. He states that there might be many reasons for people to obey the tyrant. The most important, though, is that natural law does not provide grounds not to obey him. Although the tyrant, himself, is breaking natural law, the people do not have the right to dispose him. Since God has ultimately been the one to give the tyrant his power, he alone "has the right" (Dowley 532) to correct the tyrant. If the tyrant is intolerable then there should be only a public action against him. This is because the multitude gave the king his power but when he abused it by becoming a tyrant, the multitude has the right to depose him. Aquinas holds that unjustified or unauthorized actions against a tyrant are much more dangerous than the tyrant's acts. Revolution would likely result in faction, sedition, and civil war. If these occur then the benefit of a political society is gone only to remedy a few defects before. Locke does not see toleration of a tyrant as acceptable. Locke accuses tyranny as an illegitimate government that violates individual's national rights. By doing this government places itself in a state of war, which he defends the citizens as having a moral right to resist. Lock, unlike Aquinas, believes more good would result from resistance than toleration of the tyrant.

Although, Locke and Aquinas differ on some major topics in their political ideas, such as toleration of a tyrant, both are crucial to understanding political thought. Many of their teachings correspond with each other. These men have contributed much by their writings and are still influential today.

Recommended Reading

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