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## Political Philosophy and Human Nature in Thomas Aquinas

This essay has a proximate and an ultimate aim. Its proximate aim is to undertake an analysis of Thomas Aquinas’ philosophy of law in the *Summa theologiae*.<sup>1</sup> Its ultimate aim is to discern what may be described, albeit arguably, as Aquinas’ political philosophy and its presupposed understanding of human nature. An undertaking such as this must take into account two sets of possible objections. In concrete terms, one is obliged to admit that, for at least two reasons, if there were to be recitation of a litany of political philosophers, the name of Thomas Aquinas would most probably not feature.

First, Aquinas’ credentials as a philosopher and the relationship between philosophy and theology in his writings remain a bone of contention within and outside his circle of disciples.<sup>2</sup> Among his disciples are those who would prefer to see him more as a theologian than as a

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<sup>1</sup> The main focus here is on *S.Th.* I–II, 90–94. English translation by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

<sup>2</sup> See the lively discussion in Jean-Pierre Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 236–239.

philosopher.<sup>3</sup> Outside his cycle of disciples one cannot but cite the example of Bertrand Russell who, on the grounds of undeniable antecedent Christian influence on Aquinas' thought process, would argue that Aquinas was not a philosopher. Secondly, unlike Plato who bequeathed the *Republic*, Aristotle who wrote the *Politics*, Machiavelli who authored the *Prince*, to mention but these, Aquinas is rarely considered to have bequeathed any tome worthy of the attention of scholars of political philosophy in liberal democracies of our time.<sup>4</sup>

To the first set of objections I respond by submitting that the position one takes on the question of whether or not Aquinas was a philosopher would largely, perhaps solely, depend on the stand a commentator takes on Aquinas' use of Aristotle in the construction of his thought. Jean-Pierre Torrell has provided an excellent resumé of three divergent opinions on this matter. These are: (i) the position of those who accentuate Aquinas' "objectivity and fidelity" without showcasing his personal opinion; (ii) the position of commentators who held the view that Aquinas did not shy away from expressing his own opinion "rectifying and amplifying Aristotle when he thinks it necessary;" and (iii) the position of those who held the opinion that Aquinas as commentator on Aristotle remained in objective fidelity to the latter without failing to express his own point of view.<sup>5</sup>

While acknowledging with Torrell that this manner of formulating the question is somewhat outdated, I contend that the relevance of the question endures in the question of whether or not Aquinas could be

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Thomas O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Not to be ignored, however, is his *De regno ad regem Cypri*. English translation *On Kingship, to the King of Cyprus*, trans. G. B. Phelan and I. T. Eschmann (Toronto: PIMS, 1949) in which he took the position that monarchy would be preferable because, as he argued, tyranny would most likely result from the rule of many, and that tyranny was to be tolerated to avoid greater evils.

<sup>5</sup> Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 237.

said to belong to the club of philosophers, in this instance, of political philosophers. I shall further argue that the first position—“objectivity and fidelity”—would imply reducing Aquinas to one who simply philosophized as Aristotle did. The second would portray an Aquinas who, in theologizing, knew how to distance himself from philosophy. And the third would describe an Aquinas who, in theologizing, never distanced himself from philosophy, but recognized the autonomy and limits of philosophy, thus showing that there ought not be a distance between faith and reason. This would be consistent with the intellectual option he announced in the *Summa contra gentiles* that the truths of reason are not in opposition with the truths of faith.<sup>6</sup> In so far as Aquinas maintained philosophy and theology in methodological and epistemic proximity, it can be argued that, even as theologian, he was a philosopher.

In response to the second set of objections, I identify with the position of Ralph McInerny to the effect that since no one could philosophize outside his or her existential ambience, influence of antecedent Christian beliefs does not, in itself, nullify the validity of a philosophy. The problem then, is not the influence of antecedent religious or cultural beliefs but the relativist reduction of every philosophy to its existential antecedents. McInerny’s panacea to such relativist reductionism “is to maintain that, whatever one’s antecedent existential assumptions, a philosophical position must obey criteria which are public and intrinsically independent of one’s motives for philosophizing.”<sup>7</sup>

Aquinas provides us with a political philosophy in so far as he furnishes us with a philosophy of law that presupposes a philosophy of human nature, reinforces his treatise on virtues, and prepares the way

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, Lib. I, Cap. 7. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph McInerny, “Introduction,” in *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), xiv–xv.

for his theology of grace. An examination of the components of his definition of law leads to an identification of the human person whose life is to be regulated by law so envisaged. This essay, therefore, reads Aquinas backwards. It starts with his definition of law before looking at the features of human nature which that definition presupposes, namely, rationality, relationality and religiosity, features Aquinas discussed before discussing law. It concludes by proposing these traits of human nature as responses to what Charles Taylor has identified as the “three malaises” of contemporary society and culture—the malaises of individualism, primacy of instrumental reason, and the political consequences of individualism and primacy of instrumental reason.<sup>8</sup>

### **Statement and Analysis of Aquinas Definition of Law**

According to Aquinas’ loaded and carefully constructed definition, “Law is nothing else than a certain promulgated ordinance of reason to the common good by one who has charge of the community.”<sup>9</sup>

From this definition marked by rigour, clarity and brevity—remarkable features of Aquinas’ language according to Cajetan and Marie-Dominique Chenu—one is able to discern four defining features of a law.<sup>10</sup> These are (i) an ordinance of reason, (ii) the common good, (iii) a legislator who is in charge of the community, and (iv) promulgation. To each of these four defining features Aquinas devotes an explanatory article before putting them together in a definition that results

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<sup>8</sup> See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), ch. 1: “The Three Malaises.”

<sup>9</sup> *S.Th.* I–II, 90, 4.

<sup>10</sup> A detailed description of Aquinas’ language is what one finds in Chenu’s explanation of Cajetan’s famous statement: “Sanctus Thomas semper loquitur formaliter.” See Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Toward Understanding St. Thomas* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964), 117–123.

from careful construction by way of a deliberate movement from premise to conclusion. The features are listed and treated here according to the order of articles in Aquinas' discussion.

The first feature of this definition is that law is an ordinance of reason.<sup>11</sup> Law is the rule and measure of acts obliging us to act or to refrain from acting. Reason is the "first principle of human acts," and the first principle is the rule and measure of human acts ordering them to their end. Thus, law as rule and measure of acts must be consistent with reason. This explanation already rules out an understanding of law as an ordinance of the will. Law is not an ordinance of the will of the legislator but an ordinance of reason. And while it is true that reason is given the power to move by the will, the fact remains that when the will wills the end, reason commands the means. Thus, explains Aquinas, "in order for the things commanded to have the character of law, will must be regulated by reason. And thus we should understand that the will of the prince [the legislator] has the force of law, otherwise the will of the prince would be iniquity rather than law."<sup>12</sup>

The second defining feature of law in Aquinas is the common good. Law is ordered to the common good, says Aquinas.<sup>13</sup> Excluded by this defining feature is a misconception of law as an ordinance made to serve the political and economic fortunes of the legislator or of an individual or of particular interest groups within a polity. Law is always to be referred to the ultimate end of human life, which Aquinas, following Aristotle, identifies as happiness. The law must be ordered to happiness of the human person, and, since every part is ordered to its whole, the human person attains happiness within a political community. It is therefore necessary "that law properly look to the order to the

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<sup>11</sup> *S.Th.* I-II, 90, 1.

<sup>12</sup> *S.Th.* I-II, 90, 1, ad 3.

<sup>13</sup> *S.Th.* I-II, 90, 2.

common happiness.”<sup>14</sup> Aquinas would paraphrase Aristotle’s statement in Book 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in Book 1 of the *Politics* saying, “we call those things legally just that are creative and conservative of happiness and its particulars by political co-operation; for the city is the perfect community, as is said in *Politics* I.”<sup>15</sup> A precept cannot be called law in the proper sense of the word if the particular deed it concerns is not ordered to the common good. Law is a precept that conduces to the happiness of the human person as his or her ultimate end in his or her relationship with other human persons who themselves have happiness as the ultimate end of their existence.

Against the claims of legal positivism, one must also identify what is included in this defining feature, namely, the moral intent of the law.<sup>16</sup> To understand law as a precept in view of the common good is to understand law as intending the good. The good is the objective of morality, and the good is the common good. The common good is the good of the human person which is unattainable outside a life lived in common in the polis. By stating that law is meant to conduce to the common good, Aquinas is not just pointing to the connection between law and morality, he is also placing before us a philosophical outlook in which legality is subject to morality. Law is relative to the good. A precept is not good simply because it is legal. It is good, that is why it is legal. In concrete terms, abortion or euthanasia may be legal, that is,

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, respondeo.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> For a lively discussion of the position of legal positivism, see Neil MacCormick, “Natural Law and the Separation of Law and Morals,” in *Natural Law Theory: Contemporary Essays*, ed. Robert P. George (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 105–133, written in response to John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). Reacting to the position of Finnis that law, for its validity, must not be separated from morality, MacCormick held the view that morality is not a condition of validity of law. For him, the fact that a law deviates from the path of morality does not mean it is not valid, even though the obligation to abide by it may be reduced or contested.

permissible in law. But that does not mean they are moral. An act that conforms to a piece of legislation is not *ipso facto* moral. It would be moral if the piece of legislation to which it conforms were to be in view of the common good. A law that falls short of the common good would be unjust. Conformity with the law is not the same as fulfillment of the imperative of justice. Separation of law and morality would expose us to unjust laws. Unjust laws do violence to human nature, and, against such laws one is rendered incapable of seeking redress. When legislations are set above moral values, one is obligated by precepts which impede one's intention to attain happiness. Such is the attempt in some parts of the world to make laws that compel violation of the seal of the confessional.

This defining feature not only points to the difference between legality and morality, it also points to the difference between morality and ethics, especially as it is understood in contemporary discourse. It is one thing for an act to be permissible in law. That is legality. It is another for the same act to be in view of the good rightly understood. That would make it moral. It is one thing for an act to constitute acceptable behavior. That would make it ethical. It is another for that which is acceptable behavior within a particular community of professionals like legal practitioners, medical practitioners, journalists, movie stars, to mention but these, to be in view of the good rightly understood. By way of a summary, an act may be legal and/or ethical yet immoral.

Contained in this defining feature is the moral intent of law as that which is accomplished within a life lived in common, that is, within a political community. In so far as the good which law intends is the common good, the purpose of law is the accomplishment of a moral project within a political project. We are dealing here with the interpenetration of morality and politics in Aquinas, and the inspiration is Aristotelian. Visibly present in the elaboration is the scheme of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: every action aims at the good, the highest good is

complete or long-term happiness, happiness is attained in virtue, and virtue is attained in friendship, that is, in a life lived in common with persons who have either attained the mean between excess and deficiency that virtue is, or are striving to attain it. Happiness is not the attainment of unrelating but of relating persons, that is, of persons who relate with each other by helping each other to attain the good. Their common good is the actualization of the potential in each person within the actualization of the potential of the political community.

For Aquinas, following Aristotle, the good is that which everyone desires. In other words, the good is not just a personal desire, it is a collective desire, that is, incapable of fulfillment outside a life lived in common. Here then is the mutual inclusion of morality and politics that is often ignored in contemporary discourse. For Aquinas, following Aristotle, politics is the intelligent regulation of common life for the sake of the common good. Politics, so understood, concretizes moral norms in the implementation of the project of fulfilling our personal and collective desire for the good. Aristotle understood politics as the good of the polis, and thus wrote the *Politics*. Before him, Plato, with the same understanding gave humanity the *Republic*. Nicolo Machiavelli, after Plato and Aristotle, understood politics as a project of protecting the fortunes of the politician, not the good of the polis, and hence wrote the *Prince*. The titles of the works point to the intent of their authors.

So much for the second defining feature of law in Aquinas. The third defining feature speaks of law as either made by the whole community or by someone who represents the whole community.<sup>17</sup> According to Aquinas, attainment of the common good takes place by way of tasks undertaken by the entire political community or by someone who bears the power of the entire community. “Therefore, to fashion law

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<sup>17</sup> *S.Th.* I-II, 90, 3.



pertains either to the whole multitude or to some public person who has charge of the whole multitude. Because, as in all other cases, ordering to the end is proper to the one whose end it is.”<sup>18</sup>

What is perhaps intriguing here is the fact that while Aquinas may not be described as a democrat in today’s terms, there is in this particular defining feature as articulated by Aquinas a pointer to democratic representation. The entire political community cannot be presented within the legislative chamber. Aquinas speaks of “someone who represents the whole community.” He does not speak of how this representative is chosen by the community. The legislator acts in the name of the community that has reposed on him or her the power to make laws and order the community to the common good, to the good of the community in each citizen, and to the good of each citizen in the community.

As is clearly evident from reading his treatise *De Regimine Principium*, Aquinas lived and wrote at an epoch in history where the monarch represented the community, where the viceroy represented the monarch, where the monarch was ordinarily on the throne until death, and where he was not ordinarily accountable to the community. It was an epoch where monarchs often ascended the throne through warfare. Today, in a democratic polity, we speak of representatives who are elected by their fellow citizens to assume the task of making laws for the good of inhabitants and citizens of the city, the political community in its entirety. Going by what has just been said regarding the mutual interpenetration of morality and politics, the conduct of such representatives must conform not just to legality, but, above all, to legality in its subservience to morality, if politics is to lead to the attainment of the common good.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, respondeo.

The fourth defining feature of Aquinas' philosophy of law is promulgation.<sup>19</sup> There is no law unless it be brought to the knowledge of those who are to be obliged by the law. Promulgation must precede application. Says Aquinas:

law is imposed on others by way of rule and measure. But the rule and measure are imposed by being applied to those ruled and measured. Hence, in order for a law to have the power of obliging, which is proper to law, it is necessary that it be applied to those who should be regulated by it. Such application comes about insofar as they come to know of it by its promulgation. Hence, promulgation is necessary in order that law have its power.<sup>20</sup>

The experience of military dictatorship in Nigeria provides an enabling impact for appreciating the import of this fourth defining feature. Nigeria underwent two bouts of military dictatorship—from 1966 to 1979, and from 1983 to 1999. During those two periods, military tyrants enforced decrees with retroactive effects, and “violation” of some of them resulted in capital punishment. It was possible to be executed for a crime that was not punishable by death at the time it was committed.

The brief analysis of Aquinas' definition of law which I have just undertaken not only brings to our attention defining features of law in Aquinas' thought, it also invites and enables us to see the understanding of human nature that informs Aquinas' definition. I shall identify and discuss three traits of human nature which support this definition, namely rationality, relationality, and religiosity.

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<sup>19</sup> *S.Th.* I-II, 90, 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, respondeo.

## An Antecedent and Parallel Understanding of Human Nature

My reflection in this part of the essay has a brief preface. The conversational trajectory of Plato's dialogue *Republic* presents a dialogue within a dialogue that justifies this inference: that a philosophical inquiry towards understanding the human person cannot be undertaken without a parallel philosophical inquiry into understanding the city. If we were to read the *Republic* attentively, we would see that discussions on politics and human nature are two parallel discussions. Socrates and his friends began the dialogue by seeking to know what a happy soul would look like: is it a just soul or an unjust soul? In an attempt to find an answer, it was decided to explore the possibility of describing a happy city: is it a just city or an unjust city? Knowledge of the soul (of the human person) points to knowledge of the city. A just city is a cohabitation of just souls. Here too, we see the mutual inclusion of politics and morality. A political community is just if its citizens are just.

We cannot understand the *anthropos* if we do not understand the *polis*, neither can we understand the *polis* if we do not understand the *anthropos*. Consciousness of this reciprocal relationship between anthropology and politics is a necessary condition for the resolution of what Charles Taylor has described as the "three malaises" of contemporary society and culture—the malaises of individualism, primacy of instrumental reason, and the political consequences of individualism and primacy of instrumental reason. Distress in contemporary society comes from ignorance of human nature, of what and how it is to be human.

By individualism, Taylor means what is considered by many to be "the finest achievement of modern civilization."

We live in a world where people have a right to choose for themselves their own pattern of life, to decide in conscience what

convictions to espouse, to determine the shape of their lives in a whole host of ways that their ancestors couldn't control. And these rights are generally defended by our legal systems. In principle, people are no longer sacrificed to the demands of supposedly sacred orders that transcend them . . . Modern freedom was won by our breaking loose from the older moral horizons . . . Modern freedom came about through the discrediting of such orders.<sup>21</sup>

Taylor lists three consequences of individualism as a "permissive society," a "me generation," and "narcissism."<sup>22</sup>

Then, there is instrumental reason, which, according to Taylor, is "the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost output ratio, is its measure of success."<sup>23</sup> While this might be liberating, it comes with uneasy consequences. Taylor writes:

The fear is that things that ought to be determined by other criteria will be decided in terms of efficiency or "cost benefit" analysis, that the independent ends that ought to be guiding our lives will be eclipsed by the demand to maximize output . . . the demands of economic growth are used to justify very unequal distribution of wealth and income, or the way these demands make us insensitive to the needs of the environment, even to the point of potential disaster. Or else, we can think of the way much of our social planning, in crucial areas like risk assessment, is dominated by forms of cost-benefit analysis that involve grotesque calculations, putting dollar assessments on human lives.

The primacy of instrumental reason is also evident in the prestige and aura that surround technology, and makes us believe that we

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

should seek technological solutions even when something very different is called for.<sup>24</sup>

The political consequence of individualism and instrumental reason, the third malaise, is the destruction or erosion of our ability to make moral deliberation by “institutions and structures of industrial-technological society.” What Taylor describes here in his illustration of the consequences of individualism and instrumental reason is a paradox. The paradox is this: individualism, which was thought to be freedom-enhancing, has been assisted by instrumental reason to make of the modern man or woman an inmate of the prison of freedom.

An individual lifestyle is also hard to sustain against the grain. For instance, the whole design of some modern cities makes it hard to function without a car, particularly where public transport has been eroded in favour of the private automobile.

A society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are “enclosed in their own hearts” is one where few will want to participate actively in self-government. They will prefer to stay at home and enjoy the satisfactions of private life, as long as the government of the day produces the means to these satisfactions and distributes them widely.<sup>25</sup>

I contend that these malaises are present in the global north and, increasingly, thanks to lingering effects of colonialism and the power and swiftness of social media, in the global south. The three malaises identified by Taylor represent a three-fold dictatorship in which we live in modern times: the dictatorship of the individual, of technology, and of government bureaucracy. To these I shall return in the conclusion of this essay. The immediate task at this point is a consideration of the three traits of rationality, relationality and religiosity, as presuppositions of Aquinas’ political philosophy. These three traits counter the

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

three-fold dictatorship of our time. The logic and pedagogy of the *Summa theologiae* are eminently indicative of these presuppositions. After all, in the great *Summa*, Aquinas' philosophy of law is treated only after his account of human nature.

### *Politics and Rationality*

The human trait of rationality is presupposed in Aquinas' definition of law when he says law is an ordinance of reason. To be recalled here is Aquinas' statement that the good, by definition, is that which every creature seeks. It is obvious that the human being, like every other creature, naturally seeks its own good.<sup>26</sup> It does so in a way that is consistent with its nature.

By nature, it is animated by a vital principle of activity (*anima*—soul) that is endowed with intellective and sensitive powers. The human being thus belongs to the genre of animals. But there is a difference. While, like every other animal, the human animal is sensitive, unlike other animals, the human animal is sensitive and intelligent, and its intellective power operates rationally. The intellective power has truth as its object, and moves towards this object from one thing understood to another that is to be understood. That is why it is called a rational animal.<sup>27</sup> In its quest for the good, its feelings play a major role. Emotions play a big part in human existence. Without them, affection and procreation, which are vital for the perpetuation of the human species, will be missing, and the human animal will go into extinction. But the human animal is not just driven by emotions. It has a capacity to subordinate its sensitive powers to its intellective powers, its emotions to reason. It is a rational animal, that is, an animal who deploys rationality in the pursuit of the good. In other words, the human animal not only

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<sup>26</sup> *S.Th.* I, 5, 1.

<sup>27</sup> *S.Th.* I, 79, 8.

seeks its own good, it does so intelligently and freely. The human animal is able to know and able to choose: able to know the good it ought to choose, able to know the means necessary for the attainment of the good, and able to freely choose these means.

Aquinas points out in his explanation of the relationship between the intellect and the will that the good that the human animal seeks is the good understood.<sup>28</sup> Thus, to desire what is misconceived as good is to become a liability by self-constitution. The human animal is therefore endowed with a will whose orientation is to the good, and with an intellect whose orientation is to the truth. The intellect enables it to make right choices, to understand and differentiate between what appears to be good and what is really good, for, as the saying goes, all that glitters is not gold. The intellect is able to differentiate between appearance and reality so that the human animal does not go about chasing shadows. In the words of Aquinas, “the intellect understands that the will wills that the intellect understand, and the intellect understands that the will wills.”<sup>29</sup> The will, as it were, wills the mission of the intellect, which is, to go in search of the really good. The intellect, having accomplished its mission by understanding and judging, reports to the will: “Here is the good you desire.” The human animal is endowed with an intellect whose function is to know what is truly good, and endowed with a will whose function is to choose the good. The good chosen is not to be just any type of good, but specifically the good presented to it by the intellect as the really good. In a nutshell, the human being is filled with a desire for the good way of life. But this quest for the good way of life is embarked upon in a rational way. The human being knows what is truly good by moving from the known to the unknown. The human being has therefore been described as a rational animal: an

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<sup>28</sup> *S.Th.* I, 82, 3–4.

<sup>29</sup> *S.Th.* I, 82, 4, ad 1.

animal naturally endowed with the capacity to deploy reason in its effort to attain the good life.

Without reason, the human being reduces goodness to feeling. And when goodness is reduced to feeling, he erroneously believes that whatever makes him feel good is good, that whatever conforms to the pleasure principle is the right thing for him, and that whatever brings pain is bad. The good then becomes a matter of sensual desires and aversions. Such is the case of a patient who is diagnosed with malaria. The doctor prescribes some painful injections to bring down his fever. He could not understand how painful injections could bring down his high fever. So, he goes off to another doctor, a quack doctor this time around, who tells the sick patient that the antidote to his high fever is not a painful injection but a bowl of ice cream. It is to avoid this poor judgment that we are endowed with rationality, the power of the intellect that enables us to identify the good we ought to attain, and the appropriate means for attaining the goal.

Law, as Thomas explains, regulates human action so that it can attain its objective, which is the good. Since knowledge of the good must precede choice of the good, and since, for the rational animal that the human animal is, knowledge is acquired by going from the known to the unknown, which is the movement of reason, what Thomas explains as law is that which ought to regulate actions of the human animal in its efforts to attain the good. That which ought to regulate human action is reason. Considering the natural trait of rationality in the human animal, laws that regulate human activities must be ordered by reason. Only such laws befit rational animals.

But rationality is not the only attribute in the human being. We must also speak of relationality.



*Politics and Relationality*

That relationality as a natural trait in the human animal is presupposed in Aquinas' definition of law is seen in his understanding of the finality of the law. The law is promulgated for the common good, says Aquinas. But the good cannot be attained in isolation because the human animal is not only rational, it is also political. Its natural habitat is common life. Here again is an instance of Aquinas' intellectual proximity with Aristotle for whom the human animal is not only rational but also political. But here too, by reason of this intellectual proximity, is an instance when misunderstanding of Aristotle has as its consequence a misunderstanding of Aquinas.

Often quoted but seldom understood is the Greek philosopher's statement that the human animal is a political animal. It has often been misunderstood as saying the human animal is one who spends all its time, energy and economic resources scheming to attain political advantage in ways that are inimical to the interests of other human animals, the interests of the common good. Such a misinterpretation comes from divorcing rationality from relationality. When reason is divorced from affection, it becomes an instrument of domination and, instrumentalized reason becomes a means of manipulation. To describe the consequences of the dissolution of the bond between reason and affection would be to paint the picture of what transpires in Thomas Hobbes' state of nature. But this was not what Aristotle meant.

The human animal as a rational animal is also a relational animal. In fact, it is because it is rational that it is political. Relationality is an eminent expression of its rationality. Whereas we cannot separate rationality from relationality in the human animal without doing violence to its nature, such a misrepresentation of Aristotle would want to separate the two. But rationality and relationality are mutually inclusive in the human animal. By affirming that the human being is a political an-

imal, Aristotle was saying that this animal lives in the *polis*, the Greek word translated into English as “city,” as opposed to an animal who lives in the forest. The rational animal called man is an animal who relates with other rational animals in a life lived in the city. And their relationship is or ought to be characterized by rationality.

To affirm, as Aristotle does, that the human animal, who is a rational animal, is also a political animal, is to affirm that this animal not only lives in the city, but is also able to use its intellectual powers to direct the affairs of the city. That serves as a useful clarificatory reminder of what politics is or should be. From the Greek word *polis* is derived the English word “politics,” which is management of the affairs of the city, just as economics, derived from two Greek words *oikos* (home) and *nomos* (law), is the law that regulates the affairs of the home. Politics is the intelligent regulation of life in the city, the rational management of human relationality. It is not a series of activities manifesting the power addiction in man. It is the intelligent regulation of common life for the sake of the common good.<sup>30</sup>

Animated by an insatiable quest for the good, the human animal cannot live in isolation. To paraphrase a well-known saying, no human animal is an island. Its good cannot be attained by living in isolation. Its search for the best way to live is in fact in search of the best way to live with others. The human being who is animated by an infinite quest for the good does not live in isolation. The search for the good is a moral quest that is inseparable from the political quest for the best way to live together. The human cannot attain its good without living and collaborating with other human animals. Its potential can be actualized only within the actualization of the potential in others, only when it works for the actualization of the potentials in others. Human aspirations can

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Mary Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (Cambridge: University Press, 2006).

be fulfilled only when the aspirations of others are fulfilled. No one can attain any good singlehandedly. The moral quest for the good turns out to be a political quest because the quest for the good life is a quest for the best way to live together.

Ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, and Christian thinkers like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas who largely subscribed to their thoughts, understood this quite well that we ought not to separate morality and politics, that the moral project is a political project, and that the political project is a moral project. The separation of the two projects came with Niccolo Machiavelli. Machiavelli eminently exemplifies the deadly separation of rationality from relationality, a separation that does violence to both. The contrast I paint here is, as I pointed out earlier in this essay, illustrated by the title of their works.

Evoked by the titles of their political discourses are two types of politics, two schools of thought. Plato gave us the *Republic*, Aristotle gave us *Politics*, Augustine of Hippo gave us *City of God*, contrasting the city of self-love with the city of God's love, but Machiavelli gave us the *Prince*. The authors of the *Republic*, *Politics*, and *City of God* teach politics for the sake of the common good, while the author of the *Prince* teaches politics for the sake of the political fortunes of the politician. Politics for the sake of the common good presupposes that the good of the human person is best served in a life lived with others, that the rational animal actualizes and fulfills itself in relationality guided by reason. Politics for the sake of the politician represents a monstrous misconception of human nature, of the human being as one who can attain the good without others or by crushing others. Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* represent an attempt to place leadership at the service of the common good. That is why the subject matter of their political discourse is the good of the *polis*, while the subject matter of the political discourse of Machiavelli is not the good of the *polis* but the

good of the politician. Machiavelli ridiculed and repudiated the philosophical doctrine of convergence of morality and politics, substituting it with his doctrine of the separation of the two, and the history of political instability and religious tensions in Nigeria eloquently testifies to the fact that he has never ceased to win political disciples.

In his definition of law, Aquinas rightly specified its finality as the common good. It is the good of the common life of the rational and political animals that human animals are. The purpose of law is to regulate the activities of moral agents that human animals are in their collaborative quest for the good, a quest that is collaborative because, by nature, they do not live in isolation, and because, again by nature, they cannot attain the good without living and working with others.

Collaboration is a necessary requirement for the attainment of the good because the human being is by nature a being who lives with other human beings. Every animal has a natural habitat. Fish live in water, birds fly in the air, reptiles on land. The natural habitat of the human being is a network of relationships with other human beings, not just any kind of relationship, but a network of relationships constituted by love and expressed in actions regulated by reason, always in view of the common good. And the quintessence of this network of loving relationships is the family. The family is the natural habitat of the human being.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Reason itself confirms that what is revealed on the pages of the Bible is an accurate description of human experience, and that is, "It is not good for the human being to be alone" (Gen 2:18). The most common translation of that passage says "It is not good for man to be alone." But the Hebrew word used in that passage is not *ish* but *ha adam*. The Hebrew word *ish* means "man," the word *isha* means "woman." *Ha adam* means the human being. The appropriate translation would be, "It is not good for the human being [not just man, not just woman] to be alone." It is a statement of the relationality of the human person. What is being said in that passage is that loneliness is injurious to human nature.

The human being is conceived and is to be nurtured in a network of loving relationships, beginning with the loving relationship of a man and a woman in a lawful conjugal

In concrete terms, the quest for the good is a task to be undertaken within a network of relationships. It is because every human being desires the good, and because the fulfillment of this desire requires an inter-subjective task, that the moral project is a political project while the political project is a moral project. The repeated and related or unrelated actions in the history of civilization, even when they miss their goal, are intended to make the human being happy in the attainment of the highest good. Nature is fulfilled when it attains its good. The human animal finds its fulfillment when it attains its good within a life lived in common. Law facilitates the attainment of fulfillment when its promulgation is in view of the common good. Law in Aquinas' political philosophy is for regulation of the life of human animals who, by nature, are rational and relational.

### *Politics and Religiosity*

Not only does Aquinas' political philosophy, in his understanding of law, presuppose rationality and relationality, it also presupposes religiosity, that is, the openness of the human animal to God. It is of course the case that God is nowhere mentioned in his definition of law.

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gal union. This is how the human being gives birth to the family, and the family gives birth to the human being. It is because the human being's natural habitat is a network of loving relationships that our deepest aspiration is to love and be loved. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard adds his voice to this by writing that the unhappiest person in the world is the man or woman who neither has loved nor has been loved.

The human being was created as an expression of God's love. Created in the image and likeness of God. The human being longs to be with others. He is born and survives in a network of relationships because he is image of God who himself is a family of three Persons. The love of these three divine Persons gave us, human beings, life. For the work of creation is the work of the *tota Trinitas*, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This life is transmitted through the love of a man and a woman, our biological parents, expressed in their collaborative conjugal act. The love of a man and a woman creates a family and sustains it. This is the way in which God uses the instrumental agency of marital union of man and woman to create the family, and the family transmits and nurtures the life of other human beings. The family is where everyone owes his life to others even as he or she has to take personal responsibility for the life.

But there are pointers to religiosity as his philosophy of law unfolds. It is found in his definition of natural law as the participation of the rational intellect in eternal law, eternal law being divine reason governing the universe.<sup>32</sup> It is also found in his argument for the necessity of divine law.

With regard to the inclusion of rationality in the definition of natural law, one recalls, first, that for Aquinas every agent, of necessity, acts for an end; secondly, that it pertains to a rational creature to move itself to an end; and thirdly, that the last end of a rational creature is God. In Aquinas' own words,

those things that are possessed of reason, move themselves to an end; because they have dominion over their actions, through their free will, which is the faculty of will and reason. But those things that lack reason tend to an end, by natural inclination, as being moved by another and not by themselves; since they do not know the nature of an end as such, and consequently cannot ordain anything to an end, but can be ordained to an end.<sup>33</sup>

Human acts, as acts of rational creatures, proceed from a deliberate will, and the object of the will is the good understood by the intellect. Now, whatever is desired by the will is desired for the sake of the last end, and that to which the will tends as to its last end is one.<sup>34</sup> For Aquinas, the last end of rational creatures is God because

man and other rational creatures attain to their last end by knowing and loving God; this is not possible to other creatures, which acquire their last end, in so far as they share in the Divine likeness, inasmuch as they are, or live, or even know.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *S.Th.* I-II, 91, 1 and 2.

<sup>33</sup> *S.Th.* I-II, 1, 2.

<sup>34</sup> *S.Th.* I-II, 1, 5.

<sup>35</sup> *S.Th.* I-II, 1, 8.

The mere fact of human rationality thus points to religiosity. The human animal has a natural desire for God because the human animal is rational.

But reason is limited in its natural capacity, and divine law becomes necessary because of the limitedness of human reason and the uncertainty and fallibility that come with its limitedness. Thus, after defining natural law as the participation of the rational intellect in eternal law, eternal law being the divine intellect governing the universe, Aquinas would speak of human law as particular application of natural law, and of the necessity of divine law. This necessity is affirmed on four grounds.<sup>36</sup>

First, it is by law that the human animal is directed to perform acts in view of its last end, which is God. But the attainment of this last end is beyond the unaided natural capacity of the human animal. Therefore, in addition to the natural law and the human law, the human animal is in need of a law given by God to direct it to God. Secondly, “on account of the uncertainty of human judgement, especially on contingent and particular matters, different people form different judgements on human acts; whence also different and contrary laws result.” Divine law enables the human animal to know without doubt what ought to be done and what ought to be avoided because it is given by God who cannot err. Thirdly, competence of the human legislator does not extend to judgement of interior movements which are hidden, but only to exterior acts. Yet, human conduct in matters interior and exterior are necessary for the attainment of virtue. Incompetence of human legislation in interior matters translates into its insufficiency in curbing and directing interior acts and necessitates divine legislation. And fourthly, human law is incapable of punishing or prohibiting all evil deeds. If it were to aim at doing away with all evils, it would do away with many good

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<sup>36</sup> *S.Th.* I-II, 91, 4.

things and thus hinder what is needed for the common good. But divine law leaves no evil deed unpunished or unprohibited.

Aquinas' arguments in favour of divine law can only be made because of his account of human religiosity. The human animal is endowed with an intellective power whose object is the truth. It pertains to the sensitive power of the human animal to be inclined to the good understood by the intellect. The truth is that towards which the intellect tends.<sup>37</sup> In the intellect's natural inclination to the truth, its acts, like all other human acts, are directed to the last end which is God. Thus, by the very fact of being endowed with an intellect that tends to the last end, which is God, human nature is open to God. The intellect attains intelligible truth when human reason moves from what is already known to what is to be known. But human reason is not able to move the intellect to know in all cases how the precept of natural law is to be applied.

### **Conclusion**

I have, in this essay, identified and examined the defining elements and presuppositions of Aquinas' philosophy of law. In this exercise, one encounters an Aquinas who takes human nature seriously in the political philosophy expressed in his philosophy of law. Law is an expression of rationality regulating affectivity in view of the fulfilment of the human animal. This fulfilment finds its ultimacy in the beatific vision. The human animal arrives at its fulfilment when its natural desires are satisfied, namely, the desire of the religious order or the desire for God. This desire for God is expressed in the desire of the intellectual order or the desire for truth, and in the desire of the affective order which is the desire to love and to be loved. These three natural desires

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<sup>37</sup> *S.Th.* I, 16, 1.



are presupposed in Aquinas' elaboration of his political philosophy. Law, rightly understood and intelligently promulgated, facilitates the attainment of these natural desires.

I must, in this conclusion, attempt to fulfill a promise I made earlier in the essay regarding the three malaises of contemporary culture identified by Charles Taylor, namely, individualism, the primacy of instrumental reason, and their political consequences. These malaises, as I indicated earlier in the essay, are not only present in the global north, but also in the global south. Writing as an African, I recognize their presence on the African continent. A recent rise in xenophobia in South Africa corroborates my assertion.

For decades, African scholars have evoked concepts of communalism in their writings as a counter-narrative to individualism. Julius Nyerere wrote of *ujamaa*, which means brotherhood, as a form of African socialism. In African studies, students have been treated to a cocktail of concepts of African romanticism to argue in favour of an African humanism. Scholars of Yoruba culture and philosophy have written about *ajobi* (a common humanity based on common ancestry) and *ajogbe* (a common humanity based on common neighbourhood). What that in fact means is that I treat you well because we are of the same stock, while I abbreviate your humanity if we are not of the same stock, even if the colour of your skin is black like mine, and even if we bear the passport of the same country. The ethnocentric traits of these evocations make of them ready tools in the manipulation of public opinion. Communalism bearing the garb of ethnocentrism has facilitated the reincarnation of Machiavelli's princes, even through the ballot box, the emergence of individualistic tyrants through the manipulation of democratic means. History of course attests to the fact that before the recent wave of xenophobia in South Africa was the genocide in Rwanda, in Biafra, and in a number of African countries. Individualism is tyranny

of the individual and, when such an individual is voted into office, common good is at risk.

Instrumentalization of reason, for its part, has its African expression in the marginalization of humanities in the education policy of a number of African countries.<sup>38</sup> In the belief that development is to be judged solely in terms of economic indices and technological advancement, and in an attempt to “catch up with technologically advanced countries,” education policies are formulated and implemented with a bias in favour of science and technology.<sup>39</sup> The dictatorship of science and technology, of science without humanities, erode moral values that are needed to safeguard the human animal and the environment.<sup>40</sup>

The political consequences of the reincarnation of Machiavelli’s princes in despotic rulers, and of instrumentalized reason, can be seen in the creation and use of governmental structures and institutions by dictatorial regimes, structures that inhibit freedom, and, *ipso facto*, disable and inhibit the citizen from striving for the actualization of his or her potential and the collective potential of the citizens of a country. In a nutshell, ethnocentrism gives rise to individualistic tyrants who, instead of installing institutions that protect and enable the citizen, act as strong men and women who stand in the way of authentic development.

The malaises of which Taylor speaks are consequences of an attempt to do political philosophy without an adequate account of human

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Anthony Akinwale, “The Marginalization of the Humanities in our Educational System,” *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies* 17–18 (2007–2008): 36–44.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Anthony Akinwale, “Authentic Development and Its Absence: *Populorum Progressio* as Commentary on Africa,” *Angelicum* 84, no. 3–4 (2007): 701–728; *Idem*, “Integral Humanism and the Integrity of Education,” *Ibadan Dominican Studies* 1 (2015): 37–58.

<sup>40</sup> I have argued elsewhere that Aquinas’ moral theory is very much-needed to provide a response to the threat to the environment. Cf. Anthony Akinwale, “Prudence and Temperance: On Aquinas’ Moral Theory and the Current Environmental Crisis,” in *Theology and Ecology*, ed. Luke Ijezie, Stephen Audu and Agnes Acha (Port Harcourt: CA-THAN Publications, 2017), 138–149.

nature. It would take a renewed recognition and appreciation of relationality to address the challenge of individualism. It would take a renewed recognition and humble acknowledgment of the limitedness of rationality to overcome hubris while celebrating the heroic accomplishments of reason. It would take the wisdom of sane religiosity to overcome the danger of instrumentalized reason. Once the causes are treated the symptoms are eliminated. Therefore, it would take a sapiential response, and not a technocratic mindset, to overcome individualism, the primacy of instrumental reason, and their political consequences. Aquinas' presuppositions of rationality, relationality and religiosity therefore point to ways of overcoming the three malaises. It takes faith to overcome the hubris of instrumental reason. But here too, one must admit, there are two problems. There is the problem of marginalization of faith, the exclusion of religion, as we have always known it, from the public sphere by those who would exclude faith "for the sake of reason." There is also the problem of marginalization of reason by those who would exclude reason "for the sake of faith." Aquinas overcomes the gap between faith and reason.

As an African who lives in two worlds—the world of African culture and the world of western culture—I note that whereas it has been said that the African is notoriously religious, it is also the case that, in today's secularized western culture, Aquinas' description of the human animal as religious will instantly generate vigorous objections from atheists and agnostics. Such objections are understandable. Isn't religion itself a threat to human existence, to peace and stability, to human dignity? The Crusades and the Jihads, discrimination, entente and friendship of expediency among people of different religious persuasions, pending the acquisition of superior firepower to impose religious convictions and conversions on others, inability to differentiate between piety and public nuisance—do these not pose a threat to humanity? These objections border on the place of religion in legislation. My Ni-

gerian experience teaches me that they are not only raised in western circles; they are also raised in the land of my birth where the delicate relationship between religion and politics poses a formidable challenge.

But to be philosophically sympathetic to such objections and questions is not necessarily to assert that they fulfill all requirements of justifiability. Understandable as they may be, these objections are not necessarily sustainable. For the problem is not religion per se but the corruption of religion. Religion is corrupted when the human animal turns its addiction into religion. The problem is man and his triple addiction to power, riches and pleasures. In this triple addiction, power is acquired and maximized so as to maximize riches, riches are maximized so as to maximize pleasure, and this is done in blasphemy, using the name of God in vain. When addiction becomes a religion, I begin to worship the person I see when I stand in front of the mirror, that is, the self, the power addict in me. We must never overlook the positive transformative effect of religion rightly understood. Religion is not just any kind of submission. If at all religion is submission, it is not submission to the love of power but submission to the power of love—to God who is love.

A certain narrow understanding of religion would seem to buttress the objections of those who would prefer that religion be kept out of the public sphere and restricted to the closet. According to this narrow understanding, religion is what you do in the Church or Mosque or Temple or Shrine. But religion as a notion is bigger than Judaism, or Christianity, or Islam or African Traditional Religion. Recall that French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau distinguished between the religion of man, which he said focuses on morality and God, and the religion of the society, civil religion, which obliges allegiance to the

state, to its symbols and institutions.<sup>41</sup> Civil religion, he says, expresses itself in patriotism. The flag, the constitution, human rights and related things become objects of worship. Whether or not one agrees with this typology of religion, whoever watches the inauguration of a President cannot but observe how the modern state has made certain things into objects of worship. The national anthem is sung in quiet reverence and awe. The National Pledge is recited with religious devotion.

The human being who is rational and political is also religious in character because there is at least one thing that preoccupies him absolutely and unconditionally in his search for the best way to live. Every human being is animated by an infinite desire for the infinite, restless in its desire for the truth, the good, love and endless life. The human animal is perpetually desirous of the good of the intellectual and moral order. And underlying this search is the search for the good of the religious order. This is the religious dimension in the human person, the dimension that sustains every other dimension. It chiefly manifests itself in rituals, and rituals are not restricted to Churches, Temples, Mosques and Shrines. They are found in sports and in music, in politics, in academia and in the stock exchange.

In an essay entitled, “Nietzsche’s Arsenal,” David Kilpatrick graphically describes this state of affairs. Referring to Friedrich Nietzsche and the immensely popular game of soccer, he wrote:

Having just announced that “God is dead,” Friedrich Nietzsche’s madman asks, “What sacred games shall we have to invent?” If God gave one’s life meaning, and organized religion united people with a shared system of belief, something would have to compensate for this great loss. For all the various interpretations of what Nietzsche means with his most famous or infamous words—first published in 1882 in *The Gay Science*—it is now a

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses by Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1923), Bk. 4, Ch. 8. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

fact that Christianity [in western societies] no longer plays the most prominent guiding role in the lives of the majority of people.

Today the cathedral has been replaced by the stadium. It is through sport that communities produce a shared narrative, on the field of play where contemporary heroes are made and worshipped. Soccer, more than any other sport, is the global phenomenon that has most fully replaced religion in modern life.<sup>42</sup>

It is in fact the case that the denial of religion is in the name of religion, in the name of a point of reference which is held absolutely and unconditionally, in the name of whatever a human being cherishes most in his or her innermost sanctuary. In the theology of the Christian tradition it is God.

I must conclude by saying that, considering the fact that it is largely limited to Aquinas' theory of law, this essay is by no means an exhaustive treatment of his politics. To do that would involve relating what he had to say about law with what he had to say about virtue and grace. For, what Aquinas is proposing in his political philosophy can be summed up thus: in order to manage our common life as human animals who are rational, relational and religious, we need to be schooled in virtue, reined in by good laws, and enabled by the grace of God in order to attain the common good, which is greater than anything material. It is, for Aquinas, the attainment of the beatific vision by the human animal in its return to God, the completion of the movement of the rational creature from God to God through the incarnate *Logos*, who is the way to God.

Thomas Aquinas synthesizes faith and reason in his entire project. This is clearly exemplified in his treatment of politics, the regulation of common life, in his philosophy of law. This synthesis of faith

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<sup>42</sup> David Kilpatrick, "Nietzsche's Arsenal," in *Soccer and Philosophy: Beautiful Thoughts on the Beautiful Game*, ed. Ted Richards (Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 2010), 37.

and reason allows the inclusion of religious beliefs in the political sphere. But not only this synthesis, the presupposition of a human nature characterized by rationality, relationality and religiosity points to traits that provide an antidote to the three malaises of contemporary culture of which Charles Taylor speaks, the triple dictatorship that regulates our life in the modern polis—dictatorship of the individual, of technology, and of government bureaucracy.



**Political Philosophy and Human Nature  
in Thomas Aquinas**

SUMMARY

Taking into account and responding to two sets of objections to Thomas Aquinas' credentials as political philosopher, the essay examines his political philosophy, its presupposed understanding of human nature, and its portrayal in his philosophy of law. Analysing the defining features of law in Aquinas places before the reader features of human nature, namely, rationality, relationality and religiosity. These traits enable one to find responses to what Charles Taylor has identified as "three malaises" of contemporary society and culture, namely, individualism, instrumental reason, and the political consequences of both.

KEYWORDS

Aristotle, Augustine of Hippo, Charles Taylor, common good, democracy, grace, happiness, individualism, law, legal positivism, military rule, morality, Jean-Pierre Torrell, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Niccolo Machiavelli, Nigeria, Plato, political community, politics, rationality, reason, relationality, religiosity, Thomas Aquinas, virtue.

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