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Political Science and Realism

A Retaking of Political Science for the Post-Modern Age¹

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This article contrasts the pursuit of political science from a classically realist perspective versus a modernist one. We suggest that with the developments in modern philosophy and science, political science has stopped examining the common good itself, instead pursuing what is called a “value-free” analysis based on materialism, or a utopian ideal based on subjectivism. Neither path, however, arrives at the true good itself, as both approaches begin from a flawed set of metaphysical principles divorced from reality. Our proposal is that for political science to properly seek what is the actual common good, it must begin with a solid metaphysical foundation of true realism. To accomplish this, we shall look first to the foundation of political science with Aristotle, then, we shall examine what changed with the arrival of modernity. Finally, we will rely upon contemporary critics of political philosophy (Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and Jacques Maritain specifically) to account for the problems with political science in its current form, and consider how these problems may be addressed through a return to classical realism within political philosophy.

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I. Introduction: Intersection between Realism & Political Science

In the wake of positivism and post-modernism², political science in the academy today has ceased by-and-large to offer any real prescription for the common good, content instead with providing mathematical models to quantify the material reality of different political regimes. Here, the universal has been abandoned and replaced only with knowledge of the particular.³ This is the opposite of what the classical philosopher (such as Plato or Aristotle) would consider “science.” For the ancient or medieval philosopher, science had to deal with universals in order to have a sense of permanence.

Beginning with Parmenides and Heraclitus, the Greeks understood the realm of particulars to be one of constant change. If one were to try to create a science based solely upon particulars, this science would also undergo constant change. What one claims to know one day could become false the next day, then perhaps

² Here we use “post-modern” in its commonly accepted form, referring generally to a contemporary philosophical disposition that takes modern idealism and subjectivism to its logical conclusion, denying truth in any metaphysical sense in favor of subjective “truths” that vary according to the observer. In reality, there is nothing “post-modern” about this, given that it merely continues the trajectory established by modern thought that preceded it. To call it “post-modern” would suggest that it successfully moves beyond modern thought, when in fact the opposite is true. For this reason, we would argue that what is typically labeled as “post-modern” would be better understood as “hyper-modern,” whereas the thought of thinkers such as Jacques Maritain or Eric Voegelin would be “post-modern” in a genuine sense, given that they actually do move beyond modernity.

³ We refer here to one of the oldest divisions in philosophy: universals versus particulars. By universals, we refer to generalities such as “justice” or “the good,” whereas particulars would be individual instances of these generalities. A pleasant meal, for example, can be taken as a particular instance of the good. The universal, however, would be whatever general principles follow that make a pleasant meal a true instance of the good (or more simply, whatever makes it “pleasant” rather than “unpleasant” in a meaningful sense). The basic division between classical realism and modern idealism (or nominalism overall) is that the classical realist treats universals as something metaphysically real in some manner, whereas the idealist (or nominalist) thinks of universals as only an artificial creation of the mind. The consequence for these views is that the realist can uphold that there are truths which exist about a universal such as “justice” that are independent from human opinion, whereas the idealist would have to say the opposite, namely, that there is no such thing as “justice” outside of arbitrary human opinion.

true the next week as the particulars change. On the contrary, science must seek what is true in a fixed way.⁴ This allows for the basic distinction between opinion and knowledge. Let us suppose, for instance, we wanted to study aesthetics, and more specifically, what would cause a painting to be beautiful. If we could not look beyond the particulars, all we would do is point to individual paintings and say, “I like this one.” If we wished to claim, on the other hand, that we knew why a particular painting is beautiful, we would have to speak to beauty itself as a universal, that is, the nature of beauty itself. Perhaps beauty requires a kind of symmetry. If this is the case, we recognize symmetry in the universal sense and note how it is present in a particular painting such that it makes it beautiful. In the case of political science, we would look beyond particular cities and seek instead what is universally just or unjust.

Historically, political science began as a search for the common good, which meant specifically to figure out what the final end of a society is, and how the government must be structured as means to reach that purpose. However, a tension grew between theory and practice, as even the best blueprint for the state was not enough to guarantee success in the real world. In attempting to address this problem, political science split in two directions: the abandonment of political theory altogether in favor of immediate action, and the refounding of political science based upon modern thought. In our own time, the former became the foundation for what is now thought of as “political realism” (i.e., *realpolitik*), whereas the latter became known as political idealism. With these changes, classical political theory (from the Greeks to the medievals) was left behind.

Outside of the academy, in the domain of politics itself, modern debates are largely dominated by those falling into either the pragmatic, *realpolitik* camp or the political idealist camp. From the standpoint of the classical realist, however, neither alternative is acceptable. In this article, we seek to analyze the shortcomings with the aforementioned two modern approaches to political science, and propose instead what actual realism (based on the classical tradition) would offer to political science. The simplest explanation is that classical realism allows for a true *via media* between theory and practice. A

⁴ Aristotle c.335/4bnc: *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.6, 1140b30-35: “Scientific knowledge is judgment about things that are universal and necessary, and the conclusions of demonstrations, and all scientific knowledge, follow from first principles (for scientific knowing involves apprehension of a rational ground)”.

realist framework means that while the political good is sought in the universal, it is done so with an appreciation for reality as it stands independently from our perception. In other words, the political “ideal” from the realist standpoint is not merely an idea (i.e., an *ens rationis*, a being of reason); it is an account of the good that must consider things as they are, rather than how we would like them to be.

Plaza’s critique of modernity is offered with respect to a unique shift in the history of thought, one which is ultimately concerned with the intellectual *content* characteristic of the modern age. As mentioned above, numerous cases have been made that such an approach is almost entirely neglected in contemporary political science. And while this is certainly the case, recovering a kind of realism in political science, or in politics more generally, necessitates something of a more nuanced *account* of modern democracy.

Jones, “Classical Realism in a Democratic Context” [p.254].

Against the classical realist, what modern political realism and idealism have in common is that they begin by reducing reality to the material alone. The primary difference between them is that the political realist does not believe in any further good beyond the present material condition nor any possible alternative than to deal with what we are given, while the political idealist believes in our ability to replace our current material condition with a better one. Both, however, will measure success purely in terms of immediate results on the basis of a strictly empirical metric. This differs drastically from the classical realist tradition (from the Greeks to the Medievals) that began with an understanding of reality beyond just the material order, as noted prior.

Every political scientist will claim to be “realistic” given that they are engaging precisely with a practical science rather than a speculative one. Nevertheless, from a classically realist standpoint, neither modern approach is realistic in the proper sense given that they begin from either an incomplete view of reality or a fundamentally distorted one. To demonstrate this point, we shall conclude by looking to the thought of Eric Voegelin and Jacques Maritain, both of whom

critiqued modern political science in all of its contemporary forms, while proposing a new political science in harmony with a true philosophy of being. We will also include the thought of Leo Strauss, as he dealt with this broader issue, treating especially its historical development.

Voegelin criticized the modern's rejection of the transcendent order, characterizing it largely as an ideological revolt against God, in which man himself has striven to take the place of the divine. Here, Voegelin thought primarily of the political idealists, whom he considered more as Gnostics than actual philosophers. He explained throughout his work that it was Gnosticism, rather than science in any real sense, that lies at the core of the modern project. The Gnostic stubbornly believes that he has the "secret answer" to reality. This cannot be countered as simply an alternate philosophical viewpoint. Thus, the modern political idealist (operating as a Gnostic) can only offer ideology that runs contrary to being itself.

Like Voegelin, Maritain also critiqued the modern idealists, explaining that what they offered was merely an *ens rationis* that was no longer rooted in reality. Instead, Maritain proposed what he called the "concrete historical ideal," which immediately established a contrast between his "ideal" political state and that of a modern ideologue like Marx. Moreover, unlike *realpolitik*, Maritain did not deal with the current state of affairs purely in a "pragmatic" sense, focusing only on immediate, material consequences. On the contrary, Maritain began with an integral view of the human person in reality, both in his objectivity and subjectivity, marking out the direction we must work toward for the sake of the good in universal terms, but also as a real potential in the here and now. This "ideal" good does not require (as with Marx) a change in nature; rather, it arises from a consideration of nature as it stands. In this manner, Maritain was able to combine his metaphysical realism as a Thomist with a corresponding political philosophy for the present time. This creates a third position between the so-called political realist and idealist, as Maritain's classically realist approach seeks the political good in universal terms while still maintaining a concern for the particulars in history.

It is important to note, finally, that this critique against modern political science is not limited to Voegelin or Maritain. Several other thinkers, and in particular,

many Catholic philosophers, have worked along these same lines.⁵ Most notably, perhaps, is the work of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, each of whom dealt directly with the political problems of Western civilization in the present moment (with secular liberalism on the one hand and totalitarian ideologies on the other) along with their modern philosophical root. Prior to this, however, Voegelin and Maritain were especially influential in the twentieth century, and continue to serve not only as important points of departure on this subject, but also as guides to a new way forward. Further, while their perspective on political science is based on a classical model, it should not be mistaken as a mere retreat to the past. Rather, both offer a truly “post-modern” resolution that responds to the modern world without discarding the perennial truths of classical realism.

2. The Classical Understanding of Science and Politics

Prior to the modern age, Aristotle had set the standard for defining and structuring what we take to be as “science” in the first place. Generally speaking, while modern science (following the lead of modern philosophers beginning with Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon) is limited to the mathematically quantifiable and the empirical (taken in a purely materialistic sense), Aristotelian science was defined more broadly as a knowledge of causes attained through demonstration. As Aristotle stated in the *Posterior Analytics*: “We consider that we have unqualified knowledge of anything (as contrasted with the accidental knowledge of the sophist) when we believe that we know (i) **that the cause from which the fact results is the cause of that fact**, and (ii) **that the fact cannot be otherwise.**”⁶ Clearly, Aristotle stressed that the cause must, in truth, be the actual cause for the fact in question. This is an ontological point, and indeed, for our knowledge itself to be actual in this regard, it must really be the case that such a cause pertains to such a fact, as opposed to another. But for both Plato and Aristotle, reality is not confined to just the sensible material realm. For the modern empiricist, knowledge (and therefore, science) begins and ends with empirical observation. In the Aristotelian understanding, while knowledge may begin from empirical observation, it is not confined to it, just as nature is not limited in this way either.

⁵ For example: Yves Simon, Christopher Dawson, Rémi Brague, Fr. James Schall, David Walsh, John and Russell Hittinger, et al.

⁶ Aristotle c.348-7abc: *Posterior Analytics*, I.2, 71b9-12. Emphasis added.

While science itself is an epistemic state (more specifically, the knowledge of what causes a certain effect in reality), what makes actual scientific knowledge true depends upon the reality of the things themselves being discussed. Our language is somewhat redundant on this point (i.e., speaking of “true” or “actual” knowledge), as the classical understanding of “knowledge” incorporates truth *per se*. In other words, one cannot have “fake knowledge.” We can only know what is true, or rather, what is real. For us as moderns, however, we may be accustomed to an underlying subjectivist bias on this point, thinking of “knowledge” as simply what we take to be as fact, focusing more upon the knower rather than the thing known. We would posit, however, that this is really the only framework which would make any sense. If we cannot know reality, no true science (or even knowledge for that matter) would be possible. All we could “know” is how different individuals perceive different phenomena.

In order to pursue political science in the classical sense, it is necessary to rethink our paradigm for science to begin with, and to do this, we must revisit the Aristotelian foundation. The primary locus for Aristotle’s philosophy of science in particular is his *Posterior Analytics*. Within this work, Aristotle established the fundamental structure of a science, as well as the nature of scientific demonstration. Now, while it has been generally recognized throughout the philosophical tradition that Aristotle had his own scientific outlook of philosophy as a whole, the details for what this would mean for each science within philosophy (for example, metaphysics, ethics, politics, etc.) are not a trivial matter for one to uncover. Moreover, this task may be simpler or more complex depending upon which particular philosophical discipline is chosen for the analysis. Within an Aristotelian context, it is an easier task to demonstrate the scientific nature of the speculative sciences, such as natural philosophy, as they each clearly deal with universals within their respective scopes. The practical sciences (ethics, economics, politics), however, appear to deal with the more contingent matters of human life rather than universals in nature. While politics certainly admits room for contingency, it must be guided by universals for it to retain any legitimate character of truth whatsoever.

An Aristotelian science is ordered into three parts: its subject matter, its principles, and its conclusions.⁷ The subject matter of a science is, generally

⁷ Ibid, I.10, 76b12-15: “Every demonstrative science is concerned with three things: the **subjects** which it posits (i.e., the genus whose essential attributes it studies), the so-

speaking, what the science itself is about; it resolves the basic question of what a particular science studies, or what it is meant to answer. For example, Aristotle states that the subject matter of metaphysics is “being as being,”⁸ while the subject matter of biology is living being (or say, being as living). With regard to the principles of a science, this can be understood in a twofold manner: common (an “axiom”) and proper (a “thesis”).⁹ Axioms are “that which must be grasped if any knowledge is to be acquired.”¹⁰ These principles are common to all sciences, and are fundamental to every science. The principle of non-contradiction (that something cannot be true and false simultaneously), for instance, is a common axiom. It is necessarily assumed by every science, and one could not even begin a demonstration without it; to deny it would be absurd. As all demonstrations must presuppose such an axiom to begin with, however, there cannot be a scientific demonstration of a common axiom. One cannot assume what he is trying to prove. A proper principle on the other hand is one which belongs properly to a particular science.¹¹ For example, Euclid’s postulates serve as proper principles in geometry, such as the principle that a straight-line segment can be drawn joining any two points. Like axioms, however, they are immediate, indemonstrable, first, and necessary within their respective science. Finally, as stated prior, a science is also composed of its conclusions (or its “attributes”) which are essentially the answers to our original scientific inquiries, arrived at through demonstration following from the principles of the science taken as premises. Again, taking geometry as the example, we can conclude through demonstration that the sum of the interior angles in a triangle equal to 180 degrees.

At the beginning of *Nicomachean Ethics*, he provides a basic outline for how to structure the science of politics, as well as ethics as a part of political science. Aristotle’s first move in this regard was to lay down a definition of the good as “that at which all things aim” in reference to human action.¹² Moreover,

called **common axioms** upon which the demonstration is ultimately based, and thirdly the **attributes** whose several meanings it assumes”. [Emphasis added]

⁸ Aristotle c.348-7cBC: *Metaphysics*, IV.1, 1003a20-25.

⁹ Aristotle c.348-7aBC: *Posterior Analytics*, I.2, 72a15-25.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, I.2, 72a19.

¹¹ *Ibid*, I.2, 72a15: “an immediate indemonstrable first principle of syllogism the grasp of which is not necessary for the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge...”

¹² Aristotle c.335/4bBC: *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.1, 1094a1-2.

Aristotle continued this thought by giving a *reductio ad impossibile* argument for the chief good among human ends, stating:¹³

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good.

Now, it is clear from this that Aristotle was intending to establish the starting principles of his inquiry, so the fact that he was operating under certain assumptions should not confuse us in this regard. Following Aristotle's initial consideration of the chief human good, he immediately proposed the following: "Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? ... If so, we must try, in outline at least to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object."¹⁴ Here, Aristotle provided the primary consideration for the science, namely, the human good. Having done so, Aristotle then had to identify a science which would follow from that particular subject matter. This science in question, Aristotle argued, has to be politics, because political science determines the good for man in the collective, that is, in the state.¹⁵ More importantly, Aristotle identified politics as being the "master art" of the human good because it sought it in a more universal manner; that is, political science seeks the good of the state as opposed to a single man: "For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete whether to attain or to preserve; though it is worthwhile to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states."¹⁶ Thus, we may distinguish ethics and politics in a hierarchical manner, rather than thinking of them as two completely different sciences.

Indeed, ethics lies underneath politics, as ethics studies the human good in the case of the individual, whereas politics will study the same in a higher, more universal sense. Aristotle echoed these statements in the *Politics* as follows: "... the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the

¹³ Ibid, I.2, 1094a17-21.

¹⁴ Ibid, I.2, 1094a21-26.

¹⁵ Ibid, I.2, 1094a26-1094b7.

¹⁶ Ibid, I.2, 1094b6-10.

whole is of necessity prior to the part..."¹⁷ Moreover, Aristotle confirmed this link between the individual good and that of the state (that is, the concern of ethics and politics, respectively) in stating that they are the same, thereby affirming in a simultaneous fashion the place of ethics within the higher science of politics.¹⁸

While we have been speaking of politics as a science dealing with universals, clearly it does not seem to possess the same character as a science like arithmetic. This is a basic objection from the modern mind against all of the disciplines within the humanities, namely, that they cannot offer "concrete" answers. Even though we would argue that philosophy can and does provide truth, we can readily concede that philosophical truths by their nature are not as simple to grasp as basic arithmetic, and this is especially true with practical philosophy. Aristotle cautioned us regarding an unavoidable lack of precision within political science as such:¹⁹

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts. Now fine and just actions, which political science investigates, admit of much variety and fluctuation of opinion, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature. ... We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better.

This ought to give one some pause; after all, science is defined by its judgment over what is universal and necessary.²⁰ Aristotle, however, appeared to state here that this would not be possible for political science as it will deal with what is true in general. For a modern reader, to say that something is true "in general" might suggest that we are dealing with a contingent matter that is sometimes true or false. This is not what Aristotle had in mind. The natural point here is that while political science and ethics provide necessary truths regarding the good, it is not so precise as to suggest one definite course of action for the individual or the polis, whereby each individual human person and each human city must exist in the same way, down to every particular detail (which would

¹⁷ Aristotle c.335/4abc: *Politics*, I.2, 1253a20.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, VII.15, 1334a11.

¹⁹ Aristotle c.335/4bbc: *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.2, 1094b12-23.

²⁰ *Ibid*, VI.6, 1140b31.

obviously be impossible). In this way, even though Aristotle still conceived of ethics and politics as a science, there is still a clear distinction between these and a science such as mathematics or geometry. Aristotle resolved this by distinguishing between practical and speculative sciences.

The basic distinction between the two is that practical science is pursued for the sake of action, while a speculative science is done for the sake of contemplation. While Plato united these two forms of science under the banner of wisdom, Aristotle made a distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom. According to Aristotle, moral virtue is concerned with choice, but choice comes out of a deliberate desire, thus, he concluded that if a choice is to be morally good, it must be done under the right reason and desire.²¹ The practical intellect, then, is precisely this form of reasoning within moral virtue (that is, the right deliberation before making a choice) which must exist alongside right desire, as opposed to the contemplative, which is only concerned with truth or falsity in and of itself.²² Ultimately, the purpose of practical wisdom is to make the right choice at a particular point in time. Aristotle called this the “ultimate particular,” and stated that this is what separates practical wisdom from the contemplative, since it is concerned with what must be done right now.²³

With regard to the process of practical wisdom, Aristotle described what is now commonly referred to as the practical syllogism.²⁴ The first premise of a practical syllogism is universal (e.g., “it is wrong to steal,” “it is good to study philosophy,” etc.), the second premise would be a particular (e.g., “this action would be stealing,” “reading this book is part of studying philosophy,” etc.), and finally, the conclusion would be the action (or refraining from a particular action in the case of deliberation over a wrong choice) which results from the particular deliberation (e.g., not stealing, reading the book, etc.).²⁵ Aristotle also clarified this process in his *De Anima*:²⁶

Since the one premise or judgment is universal and the other deals with the particular (for the first tells us that such and such a kind of man should do such and such a kind of act, and the second that *this* is an act of the kind meant, and

²¹ Ibid, VI.2, 1139a21-25.

²² Ibid, VI.2 1139a25-30.

²³ Ibid, VI.8, 1142a24-25.

²⁴ Broadie 1968: “The Practical Syllogism”, *Analysis*, 29.1, 26-28.

²⁵ Aristotle c.335/4bbc: *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII.3, 1147a25-b4.

²⁶ Aristotle c.330bc: *De Anima*, III.11, 434a15-21.

I a person of the type intended), it is the latter opinion that really originates movement, not the universal; or rather it is both, but the one does so while it remains in a state more like rest, while the other partakes in movement.

Thus, what political science offers with respect to the universal would be in the first premise of the practical syllogism; however, since the purpose of practical wisdom overall is to conclude with action, political theory itself cannot provide us with necessary knowledge at each step. In the case of ethics (within political science), for instance, we can examine universals with regard to actual virtue or moral goodness in the case of the individual (e.g., that stealing is wrong, or that murder is wrong), but the individual still carries the task of relating these universals to a particular circumstances, which can only be done through prudence (that is, practical wisdom).²⁷ To be clear, the general truths given through the science of ethics and politics are indeed necessary truths; there is a right answer, so to speak, in any moral question. However, given that the particulars of life vary from person to person, it is a matter of practical wisdom, rather than purely contemplative wisdom, to determine how the necessary, universal truths of ethics and politics align with their particular actions. This is said within reason, of course. While each individual must decide for himself in a sense, the end point (i.e., the good) is still the same. We must make this qualification because of the obvious point that no two lives or two cities are exactly the same, but we must also caution the modern reader not to exaggerate this point, so as to suggest that what is “adultery” for one person is perfectly acceptable for another. A quick illustration of this point could be with the virtue of moderation. Given the physical differences between people, the amount of alcohol necessary for inebriation is completely different between say, a 100-pound woman vs. a 200-pound man. As human beings, both are meant to exercise moderation, but given their physical differences, a moderate amount of alcohol for the 200-pound man will most likely be an excessive amount for the 100-pound woman. These are the types of particulars we are referring to, but

²⁷ Gerson 1994: “Why Ethics is Political Science for Aristotle”, *Proceedings of the ACPA*, vol.68, 94: “Since all science is of the universal, if there is such a thing as practical science it is rooted in the universal. What makes a practical science practical is that the universal truths in which it is rooted are truths relevant to practice just as a productive science is productive insofar as its universal truths are truths relevant to production. Therefore, the universality of all science does not in itself interfere with the particularity of practical science. ... Practical science would be, so to speak, science plus practice”.

notice that in spite of these, the universal truth about the good remains: one must have moderation.

The whole point of studying ethics is to aid us in establishing the true nature of happiness. Likewise, political science must do the same for the community, that is, establishing the best good for the community. As a practical science, however, this study is not meant to terminate in the mere contemplation of such truths, but in action. The study of ethics itself will not make one virtuous, but if pursued correctly, it will help in this regard nonetheless by examining the universal truths regarding the real nature of happiness and the good human life. By considering all the virtues in this regard, the science of ethics offers a variety of particular virtues and norms which build up the virtuous life itself. We can say the same for political science. Political theory itself will not provide for us the best state on the ground, but it will help us to understand what to aim for and what to avoid. If we understand ethics and politics as sciences in the classical sense, it allows us to realize that there are indeed general necessary truths to uncover when considering the good human life as such. This means that there is in actuality a universal answer to the nature of a good human life in the broad sense, but it is still up to the individual to prudentially align his or her own particular circumstances of life to the universal itself. So, for example, while the political scientist knows that the exercise of the intellect is a virtuous perfection of every human being, qua rational, he cannot say precisely how every individual should obtain this perfection: perhaps as scientist, or a professor of the humanities, or perhaps in regular dialogue with one's friends and family after work. These particular manifestations must be determined by individual persons through prudence.

3. The Split in Political Science at the Beginning of Modernity

The modern departure from classical political science came arguably with the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli, each providing his own distinct path which remains today. Machiavelli was first, spawning a new form of political realism (albeit, a pseudo-realism), one he claimed was not of his own imagination, but a simple description of the particulars as they stand on the ground.²⁸ Machiavellianism, as it is called today, is not really a philosophy in the

²⁸ Maritain 1968: *Integral Humanism*, 294.

traditional sense. If anything, it primarily signifies the lack of one. It is not that Machiavelli denied the existence of virtue or justice necessarily, he just did not care to consider them one way or the other. Machiavelli famously declared that he was advising the ruler to be vicious when necessary because that is what brought actual results in the world (an echo of Thrasymachus' argument in Plato's *Republic*), whereas one who tried to be virtuous at all times would end up in ruins.²⁹ The only thing that matters is what he perceived to be concrete results, which boil down to military strength, economic wealth, and political stability. This cynical approach to politics became known as "political realism" (*realpolitik*) in the modern world because its adherents claim that they are the only ones honest enough to deal with the game of politics as it is truly played on the ground, far from the mind of the man in the ivory tower. There is no room for discussion on this matter, as the political realist does not care for contemplation, he is only a man of action. *Realpolitik* is not a science, nor does it pretend to be either. Machiavelli only spoke to politics as an admittedly perverse *techne* at best, a craft of manipulation and power, nothing more.

In theory, much of modern science has rejected the Aristotelian doctrine that the aim of science is to discover the form or nature of what things are. Modern science has exchanged knowledge of nature with the ability to manipulate it for the sake of greater power and dominance. This is precisely the stated goal of Francis Bacon's *New Organon*, whereby knowledge is reduced to engineering and coercion. In the same way, this is how Pope Francis portrays modern science, conceived in the Cartesian vision of "a technique of possession, mastery and transformation." For

²⁹ Machiavelli 1532: *The Prince*, XV: "Many writers have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen nor known to exist in reality. For there is such a distance between how one lives and how one ought to live, that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done achieves his downfall rather than his preservation. A man who wishes to profess goodness at all times will come to ruin among so many who are not good. Therefore, it is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain himself to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge or not to use it according to necessity."

Pope Francis, without seeing nature as “form,” it eventually succumbs to domination and procedural control.

Jones, “Classical Realism in a Democratic Context” [p.253].

Hobbes also fancied himself to be a realist of sorts, but unlike Machiavelli, he did care to engage in some form of political science. Even though Hobbes had a similar perspective on politics as Machiavelli, he did still believe he could couch his ideas in seemingly universal terms (even as an outright nominalist). In this manner, Hobbes created a new form of political idealism, creating a path for others to follow (like Marx) even as they differ with Hobbes’ own prescriptions overall. As Strauss explained, “Hobbes regarded himself as the founder of political philosophy or political science,” knowing that this claim is originally linked to Socrates.³⁰ Ironically though, Strauss noted that Hobbes was actually indebted to the tradition he set out to reject.³¹ First, Hobbes had to accept that political philosophy or science was possible to begin with.³² Again, this is where we see the split from *realpolitik*.

While he claimed to be more grounded than his predecessors, Hobbes only acknowledged the “idealistic” form of political philosophy (that is, the search for the best regime), ignoring the anti-idealistic tradition of political thought in history.³³ In so doing, Strauss argued, Hobbes implicitly accepted the idealistic formulation of political philosophy as being political philosophy itself.³⁴ Where Hobbes parted ways with classical political philosophy, however, was in his rejection of defining man as a political or social animal by nature.³⁵ Hobbes saw man as apolitical, and like an Epicurean, equated the good with the pleasant.³⁶

³⁰ Strauss 1953: *Natural Right and History*, 166.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 167.

³³ *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁶ Hobbes 1651: *Leviathan*, XV: “And the science of them is the true and only moral philosophy. For moral philosophy is nothing else but the science of what is good and evil in the conversation and society of mankind. Good and evil are names that signify our appetites and aversions, which in different tempers, customs, and doctrines of men are different: and diverse men differ not only in their judgement on the senses of what is

The twist for Hobbes was to utilize man's apolitical nature in a political manner, and in so doing, Hobbes became the founder of what Strauss called "political hedonism."³⁷

Just as Aristotle and Plato derived their respective ethical and political philosophy from their natural philosophy (particularly with regard to human nature, of course), so too was this the case for Hobbes. If we wish to understand what led Hobbes away from the tradition before him (as with all other modern philosophers), we must consider his natural philosophy.³⁸ Hobbes was a materialist at heart, which ultimately led him toward a very mechanical view of nature. The consequence for Hobbes in this regard was to adopt the idea that human beings are meant to be masters of nature itself, to have power over nature through science (just as Bacon and Descartes).³⁹ Also, as materialism then feeds into skepticism, Hobbes separated human wisdom from the reality of the universe.⁴⁰ Wisdom then, for Hobbes, was a matter of "free construct."⁴¹ If we combine these different claims, we end up with the following: the universe is unintelligible; control of nature does not require an understanding of nature itself; there are no knowable limits to man's conquest of nature.⁴² Now, to explain the first point, one way in which materialism can morph into skepticism comes back to what we established prior in terms of universals and particulars. If one is a materialist (i.e., holding that only matter is real), nominalism (i.e., the denial of universals) follows naturally. The *prima facie* difficulty for the realist is the manner in which universals exist, since clearly there is no material object in the world which could encapsulate a universal such as "justice." Still, while it may be easier for the nominalist to surpass this difficulty (that is, by simply denying the reality of universals altogether), a more challenging problem arises. If universals have no reality of their own in some way, then true knowledge is impossible, as all we know are the changing particulars in matter. Skepticism

pleasant and unpleasant to the taste, smell, hearing, touch, and sight; but also of what is conformable or disagreeable to reason in the actions of common life." See also Strauss 1953: *Natural Right and History*, 169.

³⁷ Strauss 1953: *Natural Right and History*, 169.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 170-171.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 175.

(i.e., denying the possibility of true knowledge) is an easy way out of this dilemma even if the result is unsatisfactory.

Finally, another paradox with Hobbes was that, according to his own system, the human good must be regarded as the highest good, and thus, the highest science must be that of politics.⁴³ In spite of Hobbes' rejection of idealistic political philosophy, Hobbes' own expectations for political philosophy were more grandiose than those of the classical tradition he was rebelling against (for Aristotle, metaphysics is the highest science). Yet, Hobbes' thought also consisted primarily of simplifications, particularly with respect to virtue and political society. As with the Machiavellian *realpolitik* movement, Hobbes reduced all of human virtue to a kind of political utility, that is, usefulness to the state.⁴⁴ Where Machiavelli only reserved this dispensation for the ruler, however, Hobbes was not afraid to state this reduction of virtue in a universal fashion, covering both citizen and ruler alike. Moreover, both Hobbes and Machiavelli dramatically lowered the expectations for justice in political society, abandoning the common good in favor of an overall state of peace. Ultimately, the goal of a political society for Hobbes was purely to satisfy the passion for self-preservation within each individual.⁴⁵

This initial split in political thought has led to a false dichotomy that persists today. One could either give up on political science entirely, or if one still cared to do it, he would have to do so in a similar manner to Hobbes, resting upon the modern reformulation of science. Where Hobbes succeeded was in taking a route similar to Descartes, proposing a new scientific method entirely that would serve as the foundation to the rest of his thought. Both Hobbes and Machiavelli rejected the classical form of political science; while Machiavelli replaced

⁴³ Ibid, 177.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 178.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 201: "There is a remarkable parallelism and an even more remarkable discrepancy between Hobbes' theoretical philosophy and his practical philosophy. In both parts of his philosophy, he teaches that reason is impotent and that it is omnipotent, or that reason is omnipotent because it is impotent. Reason is impotent because reason or humanity have no cosmic support: the universe is unintelligible, and nature "dissociates" men. But the very fact that the universe is unintelligible permits reason to rest satisfied with its free constructs, to establish through its constructs an Archimedean basis of operations, and to anticipate an unlimited progress in its conquest of nature. Reason is impotent against passion, but it can become omnipotent if it co-operates with the strongest passion [**self-preservation**] or if it puts itself into the service of the strongest passion".

political science with pure action, Hobbes redefined science at its root and constructed a new form of political science at the exclusion of what came prior. This new form of science, unlike all that which came before, would have the same precision as mathematics. Finally, like mathematics, it promised to be “value free” in the sense that its conclusions are not colored by any pre-existing bias. Whether we speak of a liberal pragmatist or outright totalitarian ideologue today, if they claim to be scientific in their approach, it is still on these Hobbesian terms even if their conclusions go in different directions.

4. Maritain on the Progression of Modernity from Inception to Present

While the split between Machiavelli and Hobbes brought about a new direction in political philosophy, it was a change precipitated by a greater movement in Western culture and philosophy beyond ethics and politics. The transition from medieval to modern culture can be traced especially with the rise of humanism. Originally, humanism was founded upon theocentric principles in keeping with the broader medieval perspective, but this morphed overtime to an anthropocentric or secular form of humanism that not only exalts man’s inherent greatness but places him at the center of reality.

The Middle Ages started to dissolve once man began to feel the pressures of being under so great an order as God’s.⁴⁶ Man seemingly became nothing considered alongside God, and so the struggle emerged for how man could come to grips with this sobering reality. After all, when we consider ourselves from our own vantage point, our life is our central focus. From our perspective, we are at the center of the universe. Nevertheless, we are all too aware that each of us individually form an infinitesimally small piece of the universe. Maritain described this phenomenon as man’s “horror of being nothing.”⁴⁷ This medieval despair led man to desire being despised, lest one forget his place within the hierarchy of being.⁴⁸ Yet, this anguish was not meant to last. The shift toward

⁴⁶ Maritain 1968: *Integral Humanism*, 161.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

humanism was meant to be a rehabilitation of sorts; an attempt at rescuing man from his nothingness.⁴⁹

Now, this rehabilitation of man in the modern era did not undergo a singular expression. Maritain argued that we can differentiate two main paths of modernity through what he called the problem of grace and freedom. First, Maritain pointed to the Protestant movement, which emphasized divine grace at the expense of human freedom.⁵⁰ On the other hand, there is the rationalist camp in modernity which professed human freedom without grace.⁵¹

The Protestant movement affirmed man's nothingness, carrying pessimism to its logical extreme. Under this view, man is seen as being "essentially corrupted," yet in reality, man advanced this on his own.⁵² It is not God who reveals man's nothingness; it is man who uncovers it, mistaking his own voice for God's.⁵³ For the Protestant, man's corruption has stripped him of his freedom, whereby all that is left is grace.⁵⁴ What originally became man's source of despair is now his crutch. With freedom gone, man is no longer responsible. Thus, in the grand scheme of man's salvation, it is God who does all of the work.

Inverting the Protestant order, the rationalist chose instead to deny divine grace for the sake of exalting human freedom. Here, it is man alone who triumphs. Under this account, man's final end is to dominate nature, and to become a quasi-god within creation. This became the predominant path for modernism as we know it. As a result of such an exaltation, the rationalist view established two ultimate ends, one being supernatural, and the other natural.⁵⁵ Again, the medieval world held that there was only one ultimate end, namely, the supernatural. The moderns overall, however, began by trying to promote both, simultaneously seeking perfect happiness both on Earth and in Heaven. As Maritain explained, this move led to the "theology of natural goodness" by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whereby man is essentially good (a direct reversal of the Protestant schema).⁵⁶ Evil, then, comes from without.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 164-65.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid, 162.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 166.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

In the history of philosophy, the beginnings of modernism are placed between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with thinkers like Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes. By this point, we can see clearly what Maritain identified to be the first of three distinct moments in the progression of modernism. This first moment, labeled as the “classical” moment by Maritain, saw man seeking to advance culture in isolation, casting tradition aside in favor of human reason’s absolute power.⁵⁷ Yet, in spite of man’s attempt to abandon his roots in this moment, he was able to retain, nevertheless, the Christian ideals inherited from the preceding age. The second moment occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which modern man came face-to-face with his opposition toward God’s order.⁵⁸ This is the “bourgeois” moment, characterized by its “rationalist optimism.”⁵⁹ Finally, in the third moment (from the twentieth century onward), man comes back to despair, no longer able to bear the machinations of the world according to his own creation. Now, man wages war upon himself, seeking instead to create a new man from the rubble.⁶⁰ This is, according to Maritain, the “revolutionary” movement.

Criticizing these three moments, Maritain began by arguing that the first erred in reversing the order of ends.⁶¹ Here, culture’s supreme end was itself, and God was merely the means to its possession, in that God gave man the power to reign.⁶² The second movement carried this problem forward to an extreme, no longer accepting the limitations of nature, seeking instead to have nature conform to man, rather than the reverse.⁶³ God was no longer a means to the natural end, but simply an idea along the way.⁶⁴ Lastly, the third movement bows to the demands of technology in a desperate attempt to lord over the material realm.⁶⁵ Man is forced to encounter the harsh reality of nature, submitting himself to inhumanity in a stubborn denial of what is in front of him,

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 171.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

⁶¹ *Ibid*.

⁶² *Ibid*, 172.

⁶³ *Ibid*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

so as to continue the ongoing struggle for ultimate dominance. Here, God is an obstacle; “God dies,” enabling man to take His place.⁶⁶

The allure of modernism stemmed ultimately from its offer of an “earthly beatitude,” a violent retaking of the Garden of Eden where man avenges his original fall by exiling God from the paradise instead.⁶⁷ Blinded by this temptation, man simply lost his soul in the process, “turning the universe upside down in his effort to find himself again.”⁶⁸ These unfulfillable promises of the enlightenment led to the rising of the bourgeois, which saw man settle with mediocrity, confusing a vacuous sense of temporal comfort for true happiness as such. With the passing of time, however, history itself bore testimony to this failure as an “irrationalist tidal wave” inevitably began to sweep modernity in a violent reaction to the extremes of an optimistic, yet utterly despotic, rationalism.⁶⁹

Maritain credited Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud for unmasking the bourgeois man, “but not without disfiguring man himself in the process.”⁷⁰ Moreover, the irrationalist thread as expressed through Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Barth, and Chestov, while “noble” in their attack of rationalism, nevertheless strayed from the proper path, culminating in a “counter-humanist” movement that simply brought us back to the beast.⁷¹ “In the end,” Maritain explained, “Nietzsche gives way to Mr. Rosenberg.”⁷² Maritain pointed out that what was ultimately missing from Nietzsche’s revolt against mediocrity is that man only has two roads before him: “the road to Calvary and the road to the slaughterhouse.”⁷³

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Maritain 1946: *The Twilight of Civilization*, 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 7.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 6.

⁷¹ Ibid, 7-8.

⁷² Ibid, 8. The reference appears to be to Alfred Rosenberg, one of the main authors of Nazi ideology who claimed Nietzsche as a direct inspiration. Apart from helping to build Nazi racial theory, Rosenberg also promoted “Positive Christianity”, which was founded not upon the Apostle’s Creed, or in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, but in Adolf Hitler as the herald of a new revelation. Positive Christianity denied the Semitic origins of Christianity, replacing the Bible with *Mein Kampf*, and the cross of Christ with the crooked cross.

⁷³ Ibid, 9.

As the modern man attempts to work out his salvation “by himself alone,” he moves only in the temporal realm as though God did not exist.⁷⁴ For the modern project to succeed, God cannot exist, and all of humanity must coalesce into one body seeking to dominate history. Against this, a new humanism ought to rise, sanctifying the temporal through grace and virtue.⁷⁵ This form of humanism will be called “integral” in that it takes into account all of reality, both supernatural and natural.⁷⁶ It sets “no *a priori* limits to the descent of the divine into man,” “no conflict between the vertical movement toward eternal life ... and the horizontal movement” which finds its expression in genuine human culture.⁷⁷ While this horizontal movement may have temporal aims, it “nevertheless prepares the way, within human history, for the Kingdom of God” beyond history.⁷⁸

Concerning the concrete instantiation of the modern crisis, Maritain identified the phenomenon of totalitarianism, both as Communism and Nazism/Fascism, as the incarnations of the modern project. While both forms of totalitarian systems arrive at the same destruction, they differ nonetheless in their metaphysical principles.⁷⁹ For its own part, Marxism professes an atheism that “makes a social idol its god” as an effort to fill the void.⁸⁰ Nazism and Fascism, on the other hand, make “God Himself an idol,” denying actual truth and transcendence in favor of a “pseudo-theism,” a “demon of the blood” “attached to the glory of the people.”⁸¹ Both of these movements were made possible through the preceding dialectic of modernism noted prior, and seen within that context, it is clear that these are but the logical conclusions of a new political theory based upon the underpinnings of modern thought rebelling against the past. It is for this reason that the totalitarian regimes themselves are not the only problem at hand. They are a symptom, not a cause.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 10-11.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 12-13.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 13.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 13.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 14.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 18.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 18.

⁸¹ Ibid, 18 and 21.

5. True Political Realism: A Genuinely Post-Modern Return to Reality

Like Maritain, Voegelin also recognized the modern's rejection of the transcendent order, characterizing it largely as a Gnostic revolt against God, in which man himself has striven to take the place of the divine. For Voegelin, Gnosticism lies at the core of the modern project, and given the stubborn Gnostic belief that they have the "secret answer" to reality, this cannot be countered as simply an alternate philosophical viewpoint. Rather than philosophy, the modern Gnostic only offers ideology, one which is hostile to truth and reality itself from the start. For this reason, no dialogue can be possible, because the Gnostic has ensured this from the beginning. While there are immediate parallels here with Maritain's own critique of modernity the difference between him and Voegelin is that his answer is not to reject modernity entirely and substitute it with something completely different. Maritain remained hopeful (as was Pope John Paul II) that certain strands of modern thought can be reoriented toward the good, and that even practically, it is indeed possible for a just order to arise even within the contemporary historical sky.

5.1. Eric Voegelin and the New Science of Politics

Totalitarianism is a political phenomenon of the twentieth century which continues to haunt modern civilization. As stated prior, totalitarian movements are an outgrowth of modern political idealism, and as such ideas persist, so too does the threat of a new totalitarian state wherever the culture of political idealism takes hold. Totalitarian regimes are not merely autocratic; totalitarianism grants unlimited control and power to a ruler, and its entire *raison d'être* is to transform man and society into a perfect unit. A normal autocratic regime, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with external control alone.

The classical tyrant or despot heading an autocratic regime is a selfish ruler who cares only for his own individual good against that of the community. While the tyrant seeks what he perceives as the good for himself, the populace serves as simply a means to this end. Thus, the tyrant only cares for himself; there is no concern for the common good, save perhaps for the purposes of rhetoric as a means to control the masses. The totalitarian leader, on the other hand,

assumes the role of God, seeking not only his own good, but what he perceives to be the good overall. What makes the totalitarian ruler a creature of modernity is that it presumes an idealist framework, in which the leader alone determines what truth is entirely. Where traditionally government was limited by a “higher law” to which all men are subject, the totalitarian regime rejects the view that the foundation of truth lies beyond the ruler and maintains that the ruler is perfectly justified to mold humanity as he sees fit by any means necessary. The totalitarian leader will boldly assert that he alone declares what is law, and what is truth.

One of the first issues that Voegelin addressed in his introduction to *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* is the inability of modern political science to fully comprehend the totalitarian phenomenon as it ravaged Europe: “Europe had no conceptual tools with which to grasp the horror that was upon her The confused state of science and the consequent impossibility of adequately understanding political phenomena lasted until well into the period of World War II.”⁸² This was necessarily the case given the contemporary shift toward “value-free” inquiry, which Voegelin called a “degradation of political science to a handmaid of the powers that be,” arguing that “a restoration of political science to its principles implies that the restorative work is necessary because the consciousness of principles is lost.”⁸³ For this reason, he begins *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* by reestablishing political science in the classical sense. The “new” political science then, refounded upon classical realism, is actually the one of old.

“Political science, *politike episteme*, was founded by Plato and Aristotle,”⁸⁴ began Voegelin. Their goal was to discover the “right order of soul and society” and to create a corresponding political structure.⁸⁵ There were differing opinions (*doxa*) in Greek philosophy at the time regarding this matter, so the question became how to determine which one is truly best. Political science arose from this very question as the methodology to determine the answer.⁸⁶ The subject matter of political science, then, involved such questions as: “What is happiness? How should man live in order to be happy? What is virtue? What,

⁸² Voegelin 1968: *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 5.

⁸³ Voegelin 1952: *The New Science of Politics*, 3–4.

⁸⁴ Voegelin 1968: *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 15.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

especially, is the virtue of justice? How large a territory and population are best for a society? What kind of education is best? What professions, and what form of government?"⁸⁷ Again, the point of such an examination was not to advance mere opinion, but to "advance beyond opinion to truth through the use of scientific analysis."⁸⁸

True scientific analysis must rest upon the assumption that "truth about the order of being ... is objectively ascertainable."⁸⁹ This is the core of classical realism and was the obvious starting point for all human inquiry prior to the modern break. With the introduction of idealism, what was once an unstated and necessary component for human knowledge (i.e., the belief that human beings are capable of knowing what is real), was now cast into doubt and treated as an alternative philosophical perspective, another "-ism." Against this, the classical realist (or simply the philosopher in the traditional sense), having accepted the possibility that the order of being is knowable to him, is led further to the realization that "the levels of being discernible within the world are surmounted by a transcendent source of being and its order."⁹⁰ This realization was brought about by the movements of man's soul toward the divine being "experienced as transcendent."⁹¹ Wisdom (*sophia*) is rooted in the divine being, and the experience of love (*philia*) toward this as the "origin of being" is how "man became philosopher."⁹² Voegelin concluded that: "Only when the order of being as a whole, unto its origin in transcendent being, comes into view, can the analysis be undertaken with any hope of success; for only then can current opinions about right order be examined as to their agreement with the order of being."⁹³ In other words, what enables man to pursue science at all is an openness to the order of being as independent from one's own cognition, and moreover, an openness to the transcendent as its first principle. Coming back to the problem of totalitarianism, the rationale for these movements is borne out of precisely the opposite of this spirit.

As modernity has progressed, Voegelin argued that what we have been left are not political philosophers, but Gnostics. It is important for us to discuss the

⁸⁷ Ibid, 16.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 18.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

difference between true political science and political Gnosticism to see exactly what the consequences are of pursuing political science without a basis in realism. Voegelin traced this difference back to the Greeks, recalling the distinction between the philosophers and the sophists: “When Phaedrus asks what one should call such a man, Socrates, following Heraclitus, replies that the term *sophos*, one who knows, would be excessive: this attribute may be applied to God alone; but one might well call him *philosophos*. Thus, ‘actual knowledge’ is reserved to God; finite man can only be the ‘lover of knowledge,’ not himself the one who knows.”⁹⁴ Here, the Gnostic would think himself to be “the one who knows,” standing against the humility of the philosopher following the Socratic dictum, “know that you know nothing.” Yet, this Gnostic hubris is easily noted in modernist thinkers, particularly with political philosophers like Hobbes and Marx. If anything, it would be more challenging to think of a modern political philosopher that did not possess this disposition. Indeed, while the classical philosopher is open to discovery, the modern Gnostic who carries on the name of the philosopher has disguised will to power as science. As Voegelin pointed out: “philosophy springs from the love of being; it is man’s loving endeavor to perceive the order of being and attune himself to it. Gnosis desires dominion over being; in order to seize control of being the Gnostic constructs his system.”⁹⁵

The Gnostic system is all-encompassing and flawlessly comprehensive; it seeks only to replace the actual order of being. A Gnostic promises absolute knowledge of the whole, but with a special caveat: what the Gnostic comes to “know” about all of reality is a matter of special, individual revelation. Gnosticism is not science in any real sense (although it claims itself to be the only real science). Instead, it stumbles upon a bevy of “secret knowledge” which conveniently allows for every loose end to fall into place within its intellectual system. As the Gnostic claims dominion over the entirety of being, no mysteries remain. The “transcendent” becomes that which is unknown to the uninitiated, but known fully to the Gnostic.

Yet, for all of Gnosticism’s claim to discovery and intellectual advancement, it also completely rejects the pursuit of science beyond itself. After all, no further inquiry is necessary. Again, for the Gnostic, traditional scientific demonstration will not provide him with the answers. The special revelation possessed by the

⁹⁴ Ibid, 41.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Gnostic is simply handed down and accepted without question. However, if one were to try and analyze a Gnostic system, it would inevitably crumble under any scrutiny. The Gnostic excuses this failing by asserting that it only demonstrates the folly of human science outside of itself. Since a Gnostic movement cannot withstand questioning, then no questions can be allowed at all: the Gnostic prophecy must be accepted as it stands. Here, Voegelin recalled the example of Rudolf Hess who, when asked why he did not refuse to partake in mass executions at Auschwitz, replied: "At that time I did not indulge in deliberation: I had received the order, and I had to carry it out I do not believe that even one of the thousands of SS leaders could have permitted such a thought to occur to him."⁹⁶

If one were to reject the Gnostic prophesy, the Gnostic portrays this denial as a qualitative failing on their part. Rather than abandon his pursuit, the Gnostic will simply attack the questioner.⁹⁷ The Gnostic mindset in this regard is simply that if one does not see eye to eye with him, then it can only be because the skeptic is wicked in some way. This can easily be seen in the West today as modern minds are further polarized. The underlying tension is between those who find themselves celebrating the modern turn, pushing further into that direction, and those who sense that modernity has taken a wrong turn. Of course, there is a difference between the mass adherents of an ideology (Lenin's "useful idiots") and its thought leaders. For Voegelin, these thinkers (like Marx) are merely intellectual swindlers.⁹⁸

This intellectual swindle on the part of the Gnostic could be restated as an act of self-deception, one that is animated by an underlying will to power that disguises itself as an intellectual move.⁹⁹ Such an impetus within man beckons him toward absolute mastery. It results in a complete rebellion against the transcendent itself, as the subject feels imprisoned within the order of being.¹⁰⁰ Even though man is nowhere near the top of this hierarchy, he wishes to be. In examining the depths of the will to power, Nietzsche states: "To rule, and to be no longer a servant of a god: this means was left behind to ennoble man."¹⁰¹ Through this will to power, then, the Gnostic man attempts to make himself God ruling over

⁹⁶ Ibid, 26-27.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 28.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 30.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

all of existence. This profound self-deception becomes the dogma of a political mass movement which hails the Gnostic thinkers as “prophets.”¹⁰² These mass movements in turn take on the character of a religion, but it is only a kind of ersatz religion with man at the head, rather than God. To identify oneself as a Marxist, then, becomes akin to identifying oneself as a Christian or Jew.

Echoing Vermeule, we could add that a movement such as identity politics is not merely a new form of religion. This contention would usurp its own self-understanding. As a religion, identity politics is not only a set of doctrines, but is patently *liturgical*. The pseudo-liturgical activity of identity politics reveals its connection to the new condition of modern man. Its worship is made visible in public denunciations of illiberalism, racism, xenophobia, hatred, privilege, nourished by its nominal *telos* where humanity become witness to the final overcoming of all forms of discrimination and oppression. The vitality and tenacity of identity politics becomes intelligible by seeing it within this deracinated liturgical context. In this way, liturgy truly is the “source and summit” of identity politics.

Jones, “Classical Realism in a Democratic Context” [p.257].

5.2. Jacques Maritain and the “Concrete Historical Ideal”

Being more concerned with the root philosophy as its source, Voegelin offered more of a prescription for philosophy itself rather than its application in practice. That is to say, Voegelin focused on the problems of modern thought and argued for a better philosophy inspired more by what the moderns left behind. Maritain did this as well, but he also endeavored to speak about the regimes of his day, taking care to give a proposal for what Western governments ought to aim for in the current time. He did this in a way, however, that remained faithful to his realist principles without succumbing to either modern extreme (either that of *realpolitik* or political Gnosticism). Maritain called this a “concrete historical ideal,” and while the particular ideal itself is not our focus here, what we wish to

¹⁰² Ibid, 33.

call attention to is the nature of this “ideal” in the abstract, as it demonstrates how a contemporary political science should operate when engaged as a classical realist.

The concrete historical ideal for Maritain is distinguished explicitly from a modern utopian ideal (which can properly be called “idealist”), as it is only “ideal” in a qualified sense, grounded upon a realist conception of metaphysics.¹⁰³ First, Maritain proclaimed, the concrete historical ideal is not an *ens rationis*.¹⁰⁴ Unlike the utopian ideal, the concrete historical ideal cannot be a pure construct of the mind *against* nature, whereby in the utopian ideal, reality is *submerged* under the *ens rationis*. That is to say, the utopian Gnostic fashions for himself an ideal wholly separate from nature, stemming purely from his own will of how he, in particular, *wishes* for the world to be. Again, this is the Nietzschean will to power we discussed earlier noted by Voegelin. The utopian ideal is founded upon knowing what the world *is not*, and wishing to *transform* the world according to this ideal which is purely a construct of the mind.¹⁰⁵ This transformation can only be accomplished by force, as the utopian seeks to change reality itself to suit his ideal. Reality must conform to the idea for the utopian, not the inverse. The concrete historical ideal, on the other hand, must be established according to what the world *truly is*.

Maritain’s concrete historical ideal can only be understood from the vantage point of realism, and can only exist as an outgrowth of it. It is not a transformation of being, rather, it is an understanding of it as it exists on its terms. For this reason, Maritain explained, the concrete historical ideal must be fashioned under a *historical sky* (the current state of the world, here and now).¹⁰⁶ Unlike the utopian, the concrete historical ideal does not describe the end of history. The utopian, given his Gnostic disposition, seeks to “immanentize the eschaton,” (as Voegelin famously put it throughout his *New Science of Politics*) to bring the end of history by force, understood as the perfection of man brought about through the ideal itself. With a concrete historical ideal, however, we admit of a certain flexibility, taking into full account man’s imperfections, knowing that while we may have a long-range goal in sight, the concrete

¹⁰³ Maritain 1968: *Integral Humanism*, 236.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 233.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 234.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*.

historical ideal is a constant *movement toward*; it is not a state of rest on earth, as the utopian dream would wish for.

Now, let us consider briefly Maritain's conception of integral humanism itself, as this complete understanding of the human person is the foundation for his political thought. The notion of "integral humanism" refers to Maritain's proposed "new" humanism, a post-modern humanism that recovers what the moderns had left behind.¹⁰⁷ This has political ramifications, of course, seeing as one's political philosophy stems from their philosophy of the human person. We discussed this above, for example, with the changes made by Hobbes. Let us begin by understanding the terms. First, "integral" refers to the fact that we are considering the human person in a complete manner, both in terms of his objectivity as a metaphysical being, a "rational animal" so to speak, and as one who possesses a unique and unrepeatable dynamism of subjectivity, a universe unto himself, that is, man as a *person*. While the medieval humanist emphasized the objectified aspect of the person (that is, man as substance; a part within the whole of the universe), the moderns focused on man's subjectivity without his ontological basis. In the medieval conception, Maritain explained, we understood man in a theocentric light. This is the proper way, as God is truly at the center of reality. Maritain, however, is not simply returning to this medieval conception; what Maritain attaches onto it is, as a result of the modern turn, a new appreciation for man's subjectivity. This is why his integral humanism can rightly be described as being *personalist*.¹⁰⁸ However, we must also stress that over and above the modern approach, we move away from placing man at the center of reality (the anthropocentric move) and recognize that in spite of our own worth as persons, we still exist within a greater order of being which, as Voegelin argued, is subject to and caused by a transcendent order. This is why the realist element is so important in Maritain's concrete historical ideal for the politician; because while we recognize the good of political action, and indeed, the autonomy (in Maritain's words) of the intermediate ends on this earth, we also understand that our ultimate end lies beyond this world to God Himself.¹⁰⁹

With this properly theocentric conception of the human person in modernity, the politician operating under a concrete historical ideal no longer faces the pressure of human praxis having to conquer the ultimate void. It is not, in fact,

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 208.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 237.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 226-27 and 288.

our responsibility to create the ultimate end and meaning here on earth through labor or will as Marx and Nietzsche would say. There is indeed a true good to be driven at, yes, but it stands to us more as the “city in speech” by Plato (as illustrated through his *Republic*) than it would as the final state of communism by Marx. We recognize the concrete historical ideal as a model for our own political action in striving toward the good, but we simultaneously note that supreme goodness will not be achieved in this life. Maritain’s vision here encapsulates the words of St. Thomas Aquinas: *quantum potest tantum aude*, to do as much as one can, as much as one is able. Moreover, Maritain described our continual striving with regard to the concrete historical ideal as continuously fashioning a “rough draft” of the good. This is in keeping with the Socratic dictum of the philosopher, “know that you know nothing,” in the sense that no instantiation of the concrete historical ideal promises to be the final word.

In his own time, Maritain conceived of the concrete historical ideal as a Christian democracy with certain features dictated by the present historical sky. So far, we have alluded to some of these such as the understanding of both man and God at their proper place in reality. Obviously, this prevents us from making the move of anthropocentric humanism in seeking the utopian ideal: we do not seek to usurp God’s throne. Our goal is not to remake the world unto our own image; we do not stand before God as Prometheus. What Maritain argued is that in being brought back to a proper notion of integral humanism (as grounded on the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas), we also must come back to the gospel. Now, even though Maritain promoted democracy (in its modern form as a mixed regime), he (like Aristotle before him) acknowledged that democracy was not the only possible form, just the best one available for the time. Regardless, whatever may come, it must be a refraction from the truth of the Gospel which stands as truth itself.¹¹⁰ Finally, Maritain argued that the features of this political regime would be that it is: pluralist, personalist, and Christian at its core.¹¹¹

It must be pluralist in order to stand against the temptation of those who seek the *sacrum imperium* (adherents of *caesaropapism*, in which the ruler is also the top religious authority); Maritain’s concern was that the Christian faith cannot be forced, and the dignity of each human person demands that everyone be given the chance to assent to the truth freely.¹¹² Only then could it be a true

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 288.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 279.

¹¹² Ibid, 243.

form of charity toward God. This goes hand in hand with the principle of personalism, recognizing the intrinsic dignity of each human person. Moreover, Maritain described the pluralist state of modern societies to be a reality of the historical sky, such that it cannot be swept aside. Nevertheless, a Christian democracy is obviously Christian inspired, meaning that while we may have a diverse body politic, we must nevertheless be in general agreement regarding the reality of the good. If there is disagreement on these matters of first principle, no unity is possible.

The deeply religious character of modern politics allows us to affirm Plaza's reliance upon Voegelin and Maritain as rather illuminating. To overcome the disorientating forces stemming from an excessive emphasis upon particulars, or an abstract utopian lens, something more than reason will be needed. To put it differently, the battle against Enlightenment rationalism, what Benedict XVI called the "pathologies of the limitations of reason," entails the engagement of a source that transcends what human intelligence can know, but which is nevertheless not opposed to it.

Jones, "Classical Realism in a Democratic Context" [p.258].

6. Conclusion: The Need for a True Political Realism Today

When discussing the intersection between political science and realism, what we are inevitably led to is a problem of first principles. Modern thought shifted its underlying first principles such that no discussion would be possible in political theory without taking into account its "meta" principles. The same has happened with ethics, and so we now argue about "metaethics" before discussing a particular case, as differing first principles will lead to dramatically different analysis and conclusions. On this topic of first principles, Strauss noted what he famously called the theologico-political problem (that is, the relationship between faith and reason with respect to political authority and philosophy) as one key underlying issue. Strauss found this to be particularly

relevant in modernity due in particular to the modern rejection of God in the political sphere, regardless of whether God is discussed within the context of metaphysics or theology. Yet, in the modern effort to avoid God, anything which may eventually lead to God has also come under fire. It is not simply that God has been removed from metaphysics, but metaphysics itself as a whole has been swept aside. As a result, modern philosophy as such (both practical and theoretical) has largely forfeited its own absolute grounding in truth. Without metaphysics acting as the foundation, modern thinkers have inevitably forgotten the place of political philosophy as the “queen of the social sciences,” that is, as the true science of human affairs. Rather than being guided by “*what is*” (the object of metaphysics), modern thinkers wish to follow their “autonomous will” instead.

Scholastic thought, contrary to the moderns but similar to the Greeks and Romans, was centered on being itself, such that theology and philosophy each involved a knowledge of the true whole, of universals. Modern thought, having given up on universal being, tends to retreat instead to the particular. While the traditional outlook in Western civilization had been to believe in the absolute nature of scientific knowledge, moderns have reoriented science (in the classical sense) so as to focus on what is relative and empirical. Having preferred the universal to the particular, modern philosophy cannot claim scientific knowledge in the proper sense; it can only be a matter of opinion.

This is an untenable state of affairs. Man still desires real knowledge of some sort. If philosophy cannot do this, Gnosticism will impose itself instead, masquerading as the new science. Hegel was a good example of this, as he attempted to forge a philosophical system which could serve as the key to unlocking all the mysteries of being itself. Marx took this into the practical realm, stripping Hegelianism of any traces of spirituality, focusing instead on making the material world the highest form of being. Again, the modern problem rears in once more, as even with those systems which claim absolute knowledge of being in its entirety, the ultimate focus (at least implicitly) is a transformation of being, rather than a discovery of *what is*.

The relationship between an actual pursuit of metaphysics (that is, metaphysics pursued from the standpoint of classical realism) with political philosophy could then be summarized as the following: metaphysics, in its study of being as it really is, recognizes its proper hierarchy. In other words, a proper metaphysical study would demonstrate to us that the human good in particular is not in fact

the greatest good; man's "autonomous will" does not surpass being itself. Metaphysics reveals the true nature of the good in terms of *what is*, thereby providing a concrete foundation for the questions of practical philosophy, which will explore in its own way particular questions regarding the good itself. For instance, seeking the best regime in political philosophy presupposes a true good that ought to be discovered. If political philosophy is to be a science, then it must involve a search for this true good on universal terms, and this can only be done on the basis of a true philosophy of being.

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Classical Realism in a Democratic Context

A Response to Francisco Plaza¹

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In this response to Francisco Plaza’s paper, I have two primary aims. First, to highlight and further explore Plaza’s critique of what I will call the “content” that makes up modern thought, especially as it relates to certain broader cultural movements in the Western world. Second, to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the socio-historical component of political science, exploring what could be called the “context” of modern democratic life. In doing so, I hope to explore some of the possibilities and limitations of the field of political science and its ability to recover classical realism in our post-modern world.

I. Introduction

In this response to Francisco Plaza’s paper, I have two primary aims. First, to highlight and further explore Plaza’s critique of what I will call the “content” that makes up modern thought, especially as it relates to certain broader cultural movements in the Western world. Second, to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the socio-historical component of political science, exploring what could be called the “context” of modern democratic life. In doing so, I hope

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to explore some of the possibilities and limitations of the field of political science and its ability to recover classical realism in our post-modern world.

2. The *Content* of Modernity

Plaza's critical emphasis upon the *content* of modern theory puts him in good company with the predominant post-war Aristotelian and Thomistic scholarship in the United States. This interpretative tradition is critical of the philosophic and political currents in the West, and America in particular, and can trace its proximate origins in the re-emergence of the theologico-political problem initiated by Leo Strauss. The critique offered by Plaza is also a welcome variant of recent critical works analyzing the contemporary American social and political fracturing that has become increasingly normative in academic and public discourse. Plaza's critique of modernity, wherein he intersects political theory and religion, positions Plaza most notably alongside the works of Patrick Deneen, Joshua Mitchell, Mark Mitchell, Mark Lila, and D.C. Schindler, to name just a few.

In continuity with this particular interpretative tradition, Plaza portrays modernity in a manner that recalls the all-too-common monistic methodology stifling the fields of political theory and political science in recent decades. Rogers M. Smith² has observed this trend to be the overwhelming focus of contemporary political science, and the particular sub-field of American political thought, known as historical institutionalism. According to Rogers, this broadly "scientific" approach primarily examines the interactions between and across institutions, outlining how these institutions become a leading catalyst for various social conflicts or movements. In addition to this, historical institutionalism tends to prioritize the role of political parties, group organizations, and the plethora of government agencies as the leading explanations characterizing modern political life.

While it is certainly the case that these two methodological approaches in political science are necessary components of its practice, they often neglect a primary locus of social and political life. The truncated form that is

² Rogers M. Smith 2014: "Ideas and the Spiral of Politics: The Place of American Political Thought in American Political Development," *American Political Thought: A Journal of Ideas, Institutions, and Culture* 3 (Spring): 126-36.

contemporary political science tends to either reject, or at least significantly downplay, the fundamental role *theory* and *ideas* play in human affairs. Too little serious attention is given to the fact that public policy, the deliberative process guiding legal jurisprudence, and the structures of governance and political rule are continually nourished by the ideas of all those involved. Political structures and institutions receive the form they have from the worldview of those who gave life to these institutions, as well as by those that continue to sustain, and work within, them over time.

As such, the predominant methodology of contemporary political science tends to neglect the *explanatory power of ideas* in shaping, and changing, the course of political life. Perhaps there is no more recent witness to the deficiencies of political science today than the 2016 American presidential election. Not only did it become evident that the predictive tools were incapable of accurately portraying *who* was most likely to win: more than this, there was an alarming inability to *give an account* for why Donald Trump was able to win the presidency. Embedded within the public commentariat was a deeply entrenched Rawlsian approach, attempting to analyze data politically, not metaphysically. This was bound to fail in its explanations. The “end of history” dialectic of the post-1989 democratic world, and the immutability of progress, became unhinged from its deterministic trajectory.³ Yet, the present models used to interpret the prevailing data could not comprehend the election results.

In returning to Plaza’s account, it becomes clear that modernity is not simply a particular historical time period that follows the late medieval and renaissance era. Rather, his ahistoricist explication underscores the fact that the modern age needs to be conceived as a set of first principles, whose inner logic “constrains” one to go in the only direction such principles allow. In this respect, Plaza’s insight echoes Etienne Gilson’s, specifically drawing attention to the relationship between first principles and conclusions:⁴

³ See Michael Anton 2016: “The Flight 93 Election,” <https://www.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/the-flight-93-election/>. See also Laure Mandeville and Joshua Mitchell 2018: “Democracy in Danger: Confusing the Symptoms of Disorder with its Cause,” <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/democracy-in-danger-confusing-the-symptoms-of-disorder-with-its-cause>.

⁴ Etienne Gilson 1941: *Unity of Philosophical Experience*, revised ed., 243.

In the first place, philosophers are free to lay down their own sets of principles, but once this is done, they no longer think as they wish—they think as they can...any attempt on the part of a philosopher to shun the consequences of his own position is doomed to failure. What he himself declines to say will be said by his disciple.

The logic of modern philosophic thought can also be readily witnessed in the present politicization of human sexuality and gender, especially prevalent in Western nations. In a 2018 op-ed essay for the *New York Times*, author Andrea Long Chu details the personal experience of transitioning from a biological male to a female. What we read in this curious and shocking account is that the narrative framework for the author hinges upon the modern reversal of a central axiom in classical political realism, namely, that “art imitates nature.” As the author contends, the purpose of seeking the transition from male to female is not in order to attain some level of happiness. Rather, the goal is to display the individual will’s ability to transcend the limits (maybe even disorder) of nature itself. The author concludes the story with the following declaration:⁵

...I still want this, all of it. I want the tears; I want the pain. Transition doesn’t have to make me happy for me to want it. Left to their own devices, people will rarely pursue what makes them feel good in the long term. *Desire and happiness are independent agents.*

What is worth observing in the above judgment is the *new conceptual framework* the author places before the reader. In short, a plea is being made for medical practice to be more firmly grounded in the patient’s desire as the standard for health. To increase the patient’s health would seem to entail increasing one’s autonomy regarding the very purpose and function of the human body. Such an understanding with respect to medical practice is indicative of more than just a shift in patient care. Indeed, patient care is being pulled by a grand philosophic shift. Being healthy becomes centered around a manipulation grounded in one’s personal preferences or desires, thereby undermining the doctor’s capacity *qua* doctor to realign the patient with the healing source that is nature itself. Interestingly enough, Pope Francis has

⁵ Andrea Long Chu 2018: “Why My Fake Vagina Won’t Make Me Happy”, *New York Times*.

described this phenomenon as the *technocratic paradigm*. This self-enclosed paradigm,⁶

exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation. It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us.

In theory, much of modern science has rejected the Aristotelian doctrine that the aim of science is to discover the form or nature of what things are.⁷ Modern science has exchanged knowledge of nature with the ability to manipulate it for the sake of greater power and dominance. This is precisely the stated goal of Francis Bacon's *New Organon*, whereby knowledge is reduced to engineering and coercion. In the same way, this is how Pope Francis portrays modern science, conceived in the Cartesian vision of "a technique of possession, mastery and transformation." For Pope Francis, without seeing nature as "form," it eventually succumbs to domination and procedural control. In this light, the relationship between human beings and nature is more vividly portrayed as one of antagonism, where "human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational." Much of the extreme environmentalism today is grounded in precisely this vision of human beings and nature as enemies.

⁶ Pope Francis 2015: *Laudato Si*, §106.

⁷ It is worth mentioning, however, that trends of contemporary scientific practice can certainly be placed within the categories formal and final causality, which are the hallmarks of Aristotelian and Thomistic definitions of science. See Michael Tkacz 2013: "Thomistic Reflections on Teleology and Contemporary Biological Research," *New Blackfriars* 94: 654-75.

3. The *Context* of Modernity

Plaza's critique of modernity is offered with respect to a unique shift in the history of thought, one which is ultimately concerned with the intellectual *content* characteristic of the modern age. As mentioned above, numerous cases have been made that such an approach is almost entirely neglected in contemporary political science.⁸ And while this is certainly the case, recovering a kind of realism in political science, or in politics more generally, necessitates something of a more nuanced *account* of modern democracy. While more could be said with respect to this judgment, let me give two brief preliminary remarks.

First, it is easy to consider modernity or liberalism as an *entity* that has some kind of actual existence in an abstract realm. In principle, I do not see anything wrong with this understanding of modernity. However, I am in agreement with Adrian Vermeule's claim that critics of the modern age can tend to neglect the personal desires and intentions of modern individuals themselves.⁹ A second preliminary observation stems primarily from Alasdair MacIntyre's fundamental insight about all forms of tradition-constituted inquiry. The aim of recovering a classical realist vision which gives credence to the proper order of being (metaphysics as *first philosophy*) will always be interpreted through the particular lens and categories of thought that constitute a given condition. This can be understood by observing Alexis de Tocqueville's remark that Americans are the most "Cartesian" of all democratic nations. That Americans can be seen as the descendants of Descartes is not simply a judgment of philosophical doctrines. The interpretive key is Tocqueville's qualifier, which is that Americans have never actually read Descartes. Somehow, the generic intellectual framework of Americans with respect to authority, reason, and truth cannot be entirely explained as the effect of the "modern intellectual turn."

In this respect, it becomes clearer why we must attend to the *context* that is modern life, and more specifically, democratic life. This is not to be portrayed as a fundamental disagreement with respect to Plaza. Rather, as mentioned above, my approach is to highlight what might aptly be considered the other side

⁸ See Paul DeHart 2014: "Political Philosophy after the Collapse of Classical, Epistemic Foundationalism," in *Reason, Revelation, and the Civic Order: Political Philosophy and the Claims of Faith*, 33-63.

⁹ Adrian Vermeule 2018: "Integration from Within," *American Affairs Journal*, 2.1 (Spring).

of the same coin. In this vein, I will briefly turn to Tocqueville, and his insight concerning the socio-historical nature of modern democratic life.¹⁰

There is no better description of Tocqueville's perceptive vision of democratic life than his primary distinction between the social conditions of aristocratic and democratic man:¹¹

Aristocracy links everybody, from peasant to king, in one long chain. Democracy breaks the chain... Each man is thereby thrown back on himself alone, and there is a danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart.

According to Tocqueville, what is unique about modern democratic citizens is that they are brought into this new world *cut off*. No longer is their identity encompassed by one's name, family, or geographic place. Democratic citizens will come to have the normative experience of being uprooted and unsettled. Seeing the world generationally, wherein we could look forward, envisioning our great-grandchildren and also remain connected to the past by living near our families, has reached its end. While it is certainly the case that every age and civilization must address the perennial human task of how to live together in this world, we cannot neglect Tocqueville's judgment with respect to the modern world: "a new political science is needed for a world entirely new."¹²

There is a profound and unsettling feature of this new reality. Tocqueville illuminates this existential angst by portraying the democratic citizen as one looking over the ruins of a bygone world and celebrating its end. However, filled with an almost crippling fear of what lies ahead, democratic man cannot muster the courage to look forward at the new world not-yet made. What is it that makes this turn to an unmade world so terrifying? In short, it is the stripping away of those various identities that were the fundamental component of life in society. As the associations of civil society continually wither away, citizens live in a condition whereby the gap between them and the state is void. Churches,

¹⁰ Defining democracy in the following way is not to claim that this is the *only definition* of democracy given by Tocqueville. For an exploration of Tocqueville's multi-layered understanding of democracy, see James T. Schleifer 2000: *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, 2nd ed., 325-39.

¹¹ Alexis de Tocqueville 1835: *Democracy in America*, eds. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, 483-84. All references to *Democracy in America* are from this edition.

¹² *Ibid*, 7.

families, and neighborhoods become undermined by an administrative state apparatus that, slowly and softly, fills the void once bolstered by the various forms of associational life. The good that arises from the variety of freedoms we experience in this new age can leave us with a renewed type of civic vigor. Civil society will become the locus of creating new identities. In this vein, being stripped of long-held identities, we might come to see ourselves as “more than kings.”¹³

The administering of this Tocquevillian lens is not novel. Among other reasons, the account that I have laid out here hopefully focuses attention upon the challenges related to the common criticisms of modernity. Perhaps more than any other, the most proximate challenge to the call for a recovery of classical realism is the rise of identity politics. The scourge of identity politics is not easily rebutted by a rhetorical endeavor that looks to recover the classical realism of Platonic or Aristotelian political thought.

My brief attempt to implore Tocqueville hopefully answers the reasons for this. At one level, the increasing rates of social isolation and loneliness in Western nations provide conditions for types of conformity and civic breakdown that do find a real origin in this new social condition that is modern liberal democracy. I hesitate in calling this an “epidemic,” but it is certainly the case that Tocqueville’s over-arching worry for democratic citizens is a proclivity towards isolation.

In conjunction with this is the emergence of the “holy” in contemporary politics,¹⁴ exemplified by identity politics more broadly. It is certainly the case that traditional religion has been on the decline over the last several decades. This, however, does not mean that religion has disappeared. It has simply moved to a different domain, namely, the realm of politics. In this respect, liberal or democratic politics can morph into a kind of religion. As Adrian Vermeule contends,¹⁵

...liberalism has a soteriology, an eschatology, a clergy, and sacraments, centered on the confession and surrender of privilege, the redemption of declaring oneself an “ally,” the overcoming of the dark past of prejudice and

¹³ Ibid, 665.

¹⁴ James V. Schall 1984: *The Politics of Heaven and Hell: Christian Themes from Classical, Medieval, and Modern Political Philosophy*, 289-303.

¹⁵ Vermeule 2018: “Integration from Within.”

unreason—a past that is itself always in motion, so that the night of unreason may well suddenly come to mean what everyone believed last year.

Echoing Vermeule, we could add that a movement such as identity politics is not merely a new form of religion. This contention would usurp its own self-understanding. As a religion, identity politics is not only a set of doctrines, but is patently *liturgical*. The pseudo-liturgical activity of identity politics reveals its connection to the new condition of modern man. Its worship is made visible in public denunciations of illiberalism, racism, xenophobia, hatred, privilege, nourished by its nominal *telos* where humanity become witness to the final overcoming of all forms of discrimination and oppression.¹⁶ The vitality and tenacity of identity politics becomes intelligible by seeing it within this deracinated liturgical context. In this way, liturgy truly is the “source and summit”¹⁷ of identity politics.

This intellectual swindle on the part of the Gnostic could be restated as an act of self-deception, one that is animated by an underlying will to power that disguises itself as an intellectual move. Such an impetus within man beckons him toward absolute mastery. It results in a complete rebellion against the transcendent itself, as the subject feels imprisoned within the order of being. Even though man is nowhere near the top of this hierarchy, he wishes to be. In examining the depths of the will to power, Nietzsche states:

¹⁶ I say “nominal” here because a significant part of the ideology concerning identity politics is that injustice in this world, ultimately, appears to have no end. Thus, the actualization of equality is not simply the goal of the movement, but the goal that can never be realized.

¹⁷ 1963: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* argues that “...the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows. For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord’s supper.” (§10) If we can envision identity politics as a pseudo-religion, with a public liturgy that is the true source of its apostolic works, then the employment of this quote becomes clearer. In this light, Schall’s argument that one of the best ways to understand modern political movements is through the study of ancient Christian heresies proves illuminating. See n.14 above.

“To rule, and to be no longer a servant of a god: this means was left behind to ennoble man.” Through this will to power, then, the Gnostic man attempts to make himself God ruling over all of existence. This profound self-deception becomes the dogma of a political mass movement which hails the Gnostic thinkers as “prophets.” These mass movements in turn take on the character of a religion, but it is only a kind of ersatz religion with man at the head, rather than God. To identify oneself as a Marxist, then, becomes akin to identifying oneself as a Christian or Jew.

Plaza, “Political Science and Realism” [p.239-40].

The deeply religious character of modern politics allows us to affirm Plaza’s reliance upon Voegelin and Maritain as rather illuminating. To overcome the disorientating forces stemming from an excessive emphasis upon particulars, or an abstract utopian lens, something more than reason will be needed. To put it differently, the battle against Enlightenment rationalism, what Benedict XVI called the “pathologies of the limitations of reason,” entails the engagement of a source that transcends what human intelligence can know, but which is nevertheless not opposed to it. I would contend that, contra Strauss, without the medieval tradition and a more robust account of the relationship between reason, revelation, and political life, the attempt to recover the principles of classical political realism will be deeply insufficient.¹⁸

¹⁸ Robert C. Bartlett claims that liberal democratic citizens are sorely in need of recovering Aristotle’s defense of the primacy of contemplation. However, in doing so, Bartlett’s Aristotle is transformed into a materialist, because the object of contemplation is nature self-enclosed on itself, since there is nothing that transcends nature. Bartlett’s concern with rise of religious fanaticism makes him turn away from a much richer account of the relationship between faith, reason, and political life. See Robert C. Bartlett 1995: “Aristotle’s Science of the Best Regime,” *American Political Science Review* 89.1: 152-60. While providing a more nuanced defense of the practice of political theology, Mark Lilla falls into a similar problem that Bartlett does, namely, by neglecting to consider the thought of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. See Mark Lilla 2007: *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*.

The Christian understanding of revelation, in a real way, can help to save philosophy and political life from its own distortions and misunderstandings. Political life is necessary for human beings, since we are naturally political. Human beings are also religious animals, but politics is not the locus of salvation. Perhaps this is the most disturbing component of modern political movements, namely, the attempt to conceive of politics as salvific. Plaza is right that we need to recover a metaphysics that is true, one which gives us access to *Being*. This ability to access the ground of existence will continually need the strength to be unhinged from the short-sighted lens of a philosophical and political rationalism. In this respect, we will need *both* classical realism and religious faith, rightly understood.

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