

COMPLEMENTARITY AND EQUALITY IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THOMAS AQUINAS

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[Editor's note: Aquinas thought that the common good of political society can be realized only by harmonizing differences among its adult members. He therefore endorsed a complementarity view of political membership, a view incompatible with democratic views of political equality. This fact makes it difficult to use Aquinas's thought as the basis of democratic theory. Locating these difficulties will help identify where innovations have been made by defenders of democratic Thomism.]

IN RECENT DECADES the political thought of Thomas Aquinas had experienced a remarkable renaissance.¹ While it has been pressed into service to underwrite a variety of positions,² what is most surprising about this rebirth is the use of Aquinas to support liberal democracy. Thus the notable neo-Thomist philosophers Simon and Maritain mined Aquinas's thought for the foundations of their liberal democratic theories.³ John XXIII's *Pacem in terris* relied on a premise that is clearly Thomistic to argue for human rights.⁴ The pope's endorsement of democracy was less enthusiastic than his defense of rights, but he explicitly stated that a regime in accord with Thomist principles can be

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² See Paul E. Sigmund, "Thomistic Natural Law and Social Theory," in *St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics*, ed. Paul E. Sigmund (New York: Norton, 1988) 180-89, esp. n. 6 and n. 7.

³ See Yves René Marie Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951); Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951) esp. chap. 5, "The Democratic Charter."

⁴ *Pacem in terris* no. 9.

democratic.⁵ John Paul II, some 35 years later, seems more wary of democracy than his predecessor, but he turns to Aquinas for a corrective rather than a principled repudiation.⁶ John Courtney Murray claimed that American liberal democracy has its roots in the Thomist tradition.⁷ Murray's writings are currently enjoying a revival.⁸ More recently, John Finnis has given "the modern usage of rights-talk" a carefully qualified endorsement⁹ and Robert George has drawn on Finnis's work to defend the rights and liberties associated with liberal democracy.¹⁰

The fact that John Paul II condemns policies favored by many liberals, that some of Murray's own contemporaries considered him a conservative,¹¹ as Finnis also is today conventionally thought to be, should not obscure the more important point that in the last 50 years a large and heterogeneous body of literature has emerged that associates Aquinas with democratic thought and practice. The interest of this literature is heightened by Alasdair MacIntyre's work. Drawing on his own reading of Aquinas, MacIntyre defends a politics of localism. He argues that any modern state, democratic or not, seriously impedes pursuit of the human good. MacIntyre's implicit critique of the use of Aquinas to support contemporary versions of liberal democracy, and the currency of this usage inside and outside the academy, make it important to determine whether it is possible to use Aquinas's political thought in this way while remaining faithful to its main lines.

In this article I argue that in fact Aquinas's political thought is undemocratic. Not only does Aquinas fail to endorse a democratic view of political equality, but in order to interpret his political thought correctly one must attribute to him an idea profoundly undemocratic in its implications. I suggest therefore that using Aquinas's thought as an intellectual basis for democracy would require a substantial revision of his own views.

My purpose is not to call into question the desirability of liberal democratic politics nor to revive Aquinas's political views. Still less do I question the integrity of work that sees democratic states as consistent with Catholicism or deny that it is Thomist. Quite the opposite. Interpreting Aquinas's political thought correctly helps us to appreciate some of the backdrop against which modern political thought, in-

⁵ Ibid. nos. 51-52.

⁶ *Evangelium vitae* nos. 68-72; Aquinas is cited in no. 92.

⁷ John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960) 41.

⁸ See *John Courtney Murray and the Growth of Tradition*, ed. Todd Whitmore and J. Leon Hooper (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1996).

⁹ John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Right* (New York: Oxford University, 1981) 221.

¹⁰ Robert P. George, *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality* (New York: Oxford University, 1993) 189-227.

¹¹ See John Cogley's review of Murray's *We Hold These Truths*, in *New York Times*, 30 October 1960, section VII, 42.

cluding modern Thomisms, emerged. It helps us to see where revisions have been made in Aquinas's thought. This sheds light on what it is for Thomism to be a living tradition and highlights the originality of those thinkers who have made the revisions.

DEMOCRATIC AND UNDEMOCRATIC POLITICAL THOUGHT

In calling Aquinas's political thought undemocratic, I do not mean simply that he failed to support procedures for political decision making usually associated with the term "democracy." Instead I make a claim about ideas, assumptions, and arguments central to his political thought, ones that could be used to show the preferability of one form of political decision making over another. To settle the question whether Aquinas was a democratic or a protodemocratic thinker, it is not enough to point out that he expressed a preference for monarchy in *De regno* or for a "mixed regime" elsewhere (*ST* 1-2, q. 105, a. 1). Nor can the question be settled by going beyond constitutional matters to Aquinas's claim that human beings are equally made in God's image and likeness. Though democrats are committed to political equality, human equality does not entail political equality; there are democratic and undemocratic conceptions of political equality. Aquinas would need to show that the conception of human equality implicit in his claim that all are made in God's image is political and democratic rather than not.

What would answer the question of whether a given body of political thought is democratic is difficult to pin down precisely. As a first approximation, I take it that a commitment to democracy entails a commitment to the view that fundamentally differences among persons are politically irrelevant. This approximation needs considerable refinement in order to see its implications for Aquinas's view. Consider what I call "political membership." Any normative political theory must say something about the elements of which political society is composed. The obviousness of the truism that political societies are associations of human beings can blind us to an important fact. Any conception of those human elements capable of sustaining normative conclusions must be spelled out theoretically. Political membership presupposes the actual or potential capacity for enjoying ends, and for exercising the powers of practical reason. Theories differ significantly in how they specify criteria for membership in a well-functioning political society, in the powers, interests, and capacities that membership presupposes, and about what status membership actually confers.

How different accounts of membership are specified will depend upon what different theorists take to be the salient features of the societies they address. Typically democratic theories proceed from the assumption that the distribution of liberties, opportunities, and resources is largely controlled by their society's governing apparatus, one that is able to back up its control by a monopoly on justified coercion. The distributive role of government and its coercive character are

therefore the features of society that motivate democratic theories in the first place. To be a member of one's society, according to these theories, is to have access to liberties, opportunities, and resources, and to exercise some control over the governing apparatus that controls their distribution.¹² More precisely, according to these theories, members of society are citizens. They are coholders of their society's coercive power, exercised in their name by political institutions. While possession of this status presupposes that the persons who have it possess the capacities they need, they are said to have their status despite differences in the degree to which they possess the capacities that citizenship requires. Democratic theories are committed to the egalitarian view of political membership.

I am not offering this view as a definition of democracy. Rather I am suggesting that it expresses an essential component of traditional democratic views of political equality. Because democratic theories endorse it, they are committed to distributions of political power that we call "democratic." I cannot defend this suggestion in detail, but note that it fits particularly well with the contractualist tradition of democratic theory from its origins in Locke to the contemporary work of Rawls, a tradition that has stressed the equality, often the natural equality, of human beings. Classical exponents of this view such as Locke vivified their commitment to equality by appealing to a state of nature in which natural human capacities were on display. Thus in Locke's state of nature, agents are depicted as equals in their capacity to reason; they are assumed to have interests in preserving their "lives, liberties and estates."¹³ In Rawls's original position, parties are similarly equal and ignorant of differences in their interests. Locke and Rawls assume that members of society are equal. They take this to have important implications for distributing political power, rights, and liberties, and in Rawls's case, income, wealth, and opportunities. The conditions of the state of nature and the original position enable Locke and Rawls to represent the fundamental equality of citizens and to draw out the political implications that place their theories in the democratic tradition.¹⁴

By contrast, in Aquinas's view, members of society are copartici-

¹² Here I draw upon Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, Mass Harvard University, 1991)

¹³ Locke discussed the state of nature in his *Second Treatise of Government*, chap 2, the phrase "lives, liberties and estates" occurs in chap 9, para 123

¹⁴ The original position is introduced in Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass Harvard University, 1971) chap 3 For the position as a "device of representation," see his *Political Liberalism* (New York Columbia University, 1996) 27 ff It might be objected that Locke's view was not particularly democratic he endorsed a constitutional monarchy, excluded women from citizenship and required a property qualification for voting However, these undemocratic features of Locke's view were due to the fact that he did not wholeheartedly endorse the egalitarian view of political membership This was reflected in his characterization of the state of nature as one from which women appear to be excluded and in which persons are unequal because of their prepolitical

pants in its common good. Aquinas thought that participation in society's common good requires possession of the interests and possibly unrealized capacities entailed by an embodied intellectual nature. But Aquinas does not assume that differences in these endowments or in the ways they are realized are irrelevant to membership in political society or to its realization of the common good. On the contrary, he assumes that there are important differences even among normal adult members of political society. He argues that realizing the common good depends upon harmonizing these differences so that each compensates for what others lack, and differences work for the good of all. He thinks that in a well-functioning political society, members complete or complement one another. Aquinas therefore endorses what might be called the complementarity view of political membership.

Aquinas's idea that members of a well-functioning political society complement one another has profound implications for how he treated authority and distributive justice. He did not draw out these implications by asking about the conditions of humanity in a quasi-Lockean state of nature. Thinking human beings naturally social and political, Aquinas would argue that a condition in which they were unaffected by political institutions would not be their natural one. He was not interested in the question of what human beings would be like under such circumstances. He is, however, intensely interested in the condition of humans without the effect of sins. Aquinas therefore discussed the state of innocence in some detail. Though he insisted that the state of innocence was not a state of "pure nature" because of the elevating effects of grace (*ST* 2-2, q. 5, a. 1), he treats the state of innocence as one in which certain natural human conditions and tendencies would have been present. Among these are natural inequality and complementarity among human beings. In discussing the state of innocence, Aquinas also drew out the political implications of these conditions. It is essential not to mistake the state of innocence for a state of nature¹⁵ or to suppose that the states of innocence and nature are introduced to answer the same questions. Still, analyzing Aquinas's treatment of the former brings to light the political consequences of his complementarity view, just as analyzing Locke's treatment of the latter illuminates the political consequences of his egalitarian one.

Having conveyed a rough idea of what I mean by the complementarity view of political membership, I now want to show that Aquinas holds this view of membership and that it is central to his social and political thought. Since Aquinas held the complementarity view rather

property holdings. Thus Locke used the state of nature to represent the political equality of citizens as he understood it but perhaps not as he should have understood it; see Joshua Cohen, "Structure, Choice and Legitimacy: Locke's Theory of the State," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 15 (1986) 301-24.

¹⁵ See D. E. Luscombe, "The State of Nature and the Origin of the State," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982) 757-70.

than the egalitarian view about political membership, he did not hold a democratic conception of political equality. And since complementarity is central to his social as well as his political thought, framing a democratic Thomism would require significant revisions in Aquinas's position. Still, I argue that the only alternative is to maintain the complementarity view while trying to avoid its untenable implications. The attempt to do this requires making claims that Aquinas would have found difficult to defend and that are impossible to defend today in light of modern political conditions.

DOMESTIC COMPLEMENTARITY

Allow me to consider an objection. It might be thought that Aquinas's political thought is obviously undemocratic and that introducing the complementarity view of political membership unnecessarily complicates what should be a straightforward argument. Thus it might be argued that Aquinas cannot endorse a democratic conception of political equality since the requisite ascriptions of political equality depend upon an illegitimate abstraction. The most compelling form of democratic theory, it might be argued, is the traditional form whose most distinguished expositors are Locke and Rousseau. Traditionally, democratic theory has ascribed political equality to citizens in virtue of their natural equality enjoyed independently of their social roles. But Aquinas thinks human beings are naturally social and political. This implies that accurate judgments about what is natural to human beings are always judgments about human beings considered as members of a well-functioning society in which they occupy one or another social role. Thus judgments about individuals abstracted from their social roles cannot be judgments about what human beings are naturally. They must, rather, be judgments about certain theoretical constructions—namely “political individuals”—that are false to human nature because they abstract away crucial features of our natural condition. Members of society might still be judged equal participants in a common good which they bring about by performing their roles but, it might be concluded, this is not the sort of equality democratic theorists are after.¹⁶

The problem with this line of thought is that there is no obvious incompatibility between holding a democratic view and claiming that members of political society are equal participants in its common good. Determining whether there is a subtle incompatibility requires looking at exactly how members of society are supposed to participate and uncovering the conception of equality in play. My attempt to impute the complementarity view to Aquinas is an attempt to do precisely that. The conclusion that Aquinas's political thought is undemocratic cannot be established without the sort of investigation I propose to undertake.

¹⁶ I am grateful to Ralph McInerny for his help on this argument.

Alternatively it might be argued that Aquinas could not accept a democratic conception of political equality because of his remarks about women, whom he considers deficient in practical reason (*ST* 1, q. 92, a. 1 ad 2), and about slaves, some of whom¹⁷ he thought are benefited by their servitude (2–2, q. 57, a. 3 ad 2). But, it might be continued, these are problems that can be easily remedied. Someone wanting to rehabilitate Aquinas's views needs only to dismiss the possibility of natural slaves and deny that there are significant differences in the abilities of men and women.

I leave aside the question of whether Aquinas's views about women could be altered without significant alterations elsewhere in his thought. Even if they can be, the democratization of his thought is not as easy as the argument under consideration makes it out to be. Despite the objectionable quality of Aquinas's remarks about women and slaves, focusing on them threatens to obscure a more fundamental problem with this political thought. To see this, it is necessary to see exactly what the proper interpretation of Aquinas's remarks about women and slaves does and does not prove.

I am arguing here that Aquinas thought members of society exhibit relevant differences in the interests and capacities that membership presupposes, and that these differences determine the distribution of political authority. This implies a significant departure from democratic thought. My conclusion would be established by Aquinas's remarks about women and slaves only if Aquinas thought that there are no relevant differences among members of society except that between women and slaves on the one hand and adult men on the other. But this is not so. Aquinas thought there are likewise politically relevant differences among adult men. Bringing these to light, and showing their centrality to his social thought, is a crucial part of documenting his departures from a democratic conception of political equality.

Aquinas's remarks about women are important for our present purposes. Like other crucial notions in Aquinas's thought, that of complementarity is analogical. One would expect that understanding one of its uses should shed some light on others. Aquinas's treatment of women, where his reliance on this notion is especially clear, is no exception. Grasping its use there helps us get a grip on what might be involved in the complementarity of members of political society and on how complementarity might ground political authority and subjection. Since many of Aquinas's most important remarks about women are to be found in his remarks about the creation of Eve, it is necessary to turn to his treatment of the state of innocence.

¹⁷ I say "some of whom" here because Aquinas uses the word *servus* to include those in a variety of legal conditions united by a family resemblance: the slaves of his own time (to whom I presume he is referring at *ST* 2–2, q. 61, a. 3), the slaves of whom Aristotle spoke in the *Politics* (*In Libros Politicorum* 1.3), those mentioned in the Pauline epistles (*Super ad Philip* 2.2) and those mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures (*Expositio in Job* 2.2).

In his reflections about whether women should have been included in "the first production of things," Aquinas noted that the act of reproduction cannot be performed by men alone. This is not a defect, as if human beings would have been made better had they been constructed for unisexual reproduction. Rather, he argued, unisexual reproduction would be inappropriate for creatures with an intellectual nature (1, q. 92, a. 1). Thus Aquinas concluded that it is natural (1, q. 92, a. 1 ad 1; cf. 2-2, q. 57, a. 3) that men should be completed or complemented by women so that the two "become one through the act of reproduction" (1, q. 92, a. 1).

This argument could convey the impression that, even among human beings, male/female complementarity is simply physical. Aquinas hastened to dispel that impression in the very next article of the *Summa theologiae* where he argued that men and women do not unite only for the act of reproduction, but also to enjoy a domestic life in which men have one set of duties and women another (1, q. 92, a. 2). Nor did he think this union should endure only until children are raised to adulthood; rather the union should be lifelong. Aquinas's discussion implied that males and females have different physical endowments that suit them for different roles in reproduction. More importantly men and women have different motivational structures and different emotional constitutions; they are naturally moved to undertake and find satisfaction in the different tasks that must be performed if a man and woman are together to realize the common good that Aquinas called "domestic community" (2-2, q. 57, a. 4). The differences between men and women also include different capacities of reason. As a result of these differences, a woman is "naturally subject" to her husband (1, q. 92, a. 1 ad 2), who is her "head" (1, q. 92, a. 2). The natural subjection of wives to husbands exists not simply for the husband's benefit, Aquinas noted. It is to benefit both the husband and the wife. It can do so, Aquinas thinks, because women need to be subject to the authority of their husbands to realize their own good. It can also do so because this subjection conduces to the common good of the household, the flourishing of which is part of the good of each of the members (for wives, cf. 1-2, q. 19, a. 10).

The extent to which it is necessary to correct this analysis of domestic relations is a matter of debate. Some Thomists, such as Grisez, seem content with its conclusions even if they would offer different arguments for them than Aquinas did.¹⁸ Others, such as Jean Porter, have argued for revision of Aquinas's views on women while trying to remain within the Thomist fold.¹⁹ Although this debate is an important one, I am less concerned with it here than I am with the key

¹⁸ See Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1993) 2.631.

¹⁹ Jean Porter, "At the Limits of Liberalism: Thomas Aquinas and the Prospects for a Catholic Feminism," *Theology Digest* 41 (1994) 315-30.

features of human male/female complementarity that emerge from Aquinas's discussion.

I want to conclude this section by highlighting four of these features. First, men and women are naturally suited to the performance of different tasks in the domestic community and are naturally fulfilled by different tasks and activities. These differences result from differences in their emotional make-up, motivational structure, and capacities of practical reason. Second, the differences between men and women are complementary so that, other things being equal, men and women united in marriage can realize the common good of the household, and thereby realize their own goods, when, and only when, both engage in the activities for which they are naturally suited and in which they naturally find satisfaction. Third, Aquinas endorsed what we might call a complementarity view of membership in the domestic community. According to this view, the notion of membership in a domestic community, of being participant in its common good, is defined by reference to the roles of husband and wife. These roles are defined by characteristic functions and tasks for which the proper occupants of those roles are naturally suited. Fourth, since one of these tasks is that of governing the household, this view of membership has implications for the distribution of domestic authority. This is a task for which Aquinas thought men are better suited than women. It is therefore a task he thought properly constitutive of the role of being a husband. In performing this task, husbands must direct their households so that each of the members realizes his or her own good and all realize their common good.

POLITICAL COMPLEMENTARITY

Aquinas, like Aristotle, was at pains to distinguish familial from political relations. He argued that political society differs from a household in kind and not only in size (see 2-2, q. 58, a. 7 ad 2). Yet a sort of complementarity between adult men, analogous with rather than identical to the complementarity of men and women, is essential to Aquinas's analysis of political society and its achievement of its common good. It follows that, as Aquinas endorses a complementarity view of membership in the domestic community, he also endorses a complementarity view of political membership. And as he took the former to have implications for the distribution of domestic authority, so he took the latter to have implications for the distribution of political authority. Thus my suggestion is that these four points have analogues in Aquinas's discussion of political society. If I can support this suggestion, I will have taken a major step toward showing that complementarity is central to the whole range of Aquinas's social thought. Since his endorsement of the complementarity view of political membership precludes a democratic conception of political equality, it follows that it would be difficult to formulate a version of democracy faithful to an idea central to Aquinas's analysis of social life.

To see how Aquinas's view of political membership differs from the egalitarian conception, one should note first that the features of political society to which Aquinas responds differ from those that are most salient to the democratic theorist. Democratic theory is motivated by the fact that the society it addresses is directed by an essentially coercive governing apparatus which plays a central distributive role. For Aquinas, by contrast, the salient feature of what I have been calling "political society" is that it is integrative.

Aquinas, following Aristotle, argued that it is natural to human beings to live in what he calls a *societas perfecta*, a society that is economically and politically self-sufficient. It is also one in which a variety of occupations are represented and in which the goods of education and culture are realized even if not widely available. Aquinas thought it natural to human beings to live in such a society because he thought that only under the conditions it provides can they realize the range of goods natural to them. Aquinas would argue that there are a number of analytically separable contributions that a *societas perfecta* makes to the realization of these human goods. One is that a *societas perfecta* enables human beings to live above the level of mere subsistence. More important, Aquinas thought that human beings can realize their good only if they participate in various forms of association that are not naturally self-sufficient, prominently including the family. He also thought that if the forms of association to which a given person belongs fail to flourish, or if they do so but without the person's contribution, then that person thereby falls short of his or her good. Contributing to and enjoying the flourishing of these forms of association is an important part of the good of each of the associates.

A *societas perfecta* contributes to human well-being by making it possible for these various human associations, including the family, to function well and to achieve their natural ends. Part of what it means for a *societas perfecta* to function well is that it conduce to the flourishing of these various associations and their members. But as the relationship between persons and associations is reciprocal, so too is the relation between persons and associations on the one hand and a *societas perfecta* on the other. The good of these associations and their members consists in part in their contributing to the proper functioning of their political society. To be a participant in the common good of political society is not simply to enjoy that good; it is also to contribute to its realization. The proper functioning of political society brings about an integrative good whose realization consists in the ordered realization of a set of goods that includes the goods of society's constituent persons and associations, the conditions that make the flourishing of those persons and forms of association possible, and "civic friendship," the flourishing of relationships among those who live in a political society. This integrative good is a common good. It is one that (ideally at least) is shared in and promoted by the activities of the members and associations of political society. To be a member of po-

litical society for Aquinas is to be a person whose good is partially constituted by promoting and enjoying the common good of that society understood in this way.

A *societas perfecta* can realize its common good only if it is governed by a person or persons in authority. Aquinas thought it appropriate to describe this authority as political; this accounts for my equation of "political society" with a *societas perfecta*. Despite the fact that Aquinas thought the authority that guides such a society to the achievement of its common good is political authority, he did not think that government necessarily plays an important role in achieving a just distribution of economic goods. This is because, while he clearly opposes the excessive accumulation of wealth, he thought that in a well-functioning political society a just distribution should be achieved by other mechanisms.²⁰ Even more surprisingly, Aquinas does not think political authority is essentially coercive. The two features of political life that serve as points of departure for democratic theory—the distributive role of government and its monopoly on justified coercion—are not essential to a *societas perfecta* or to political authority as Aquinas conceives them. Since these are the two features of political life that motivate the egalitarian view, it is not surprising that Aquinas endorsed a different view of political membership.

My claim that he did derives support from remarks about politics scattered throughout his work. Thus Aquinas said that a well-functioning political society exhibits what he calls an "order."²¹ The phrase suggests that a well-functioning society is composed of elements whose operations must mesh so that the whole can perform the functions necessary for attaining the common good. So stated, the suggestion is highly abstract and hardly decisive in favor of imputing a complementarity view of political membership to Aquinas. Whether it grounds an argument for this interpretation depends upon how Aquinas conceives of the elements of which society is composed.

One of the most striking features of Aquinas's political discussion was his claim that members of a political society stand to it as "parts" to a whole (e.g. 2-2, q. 47, a. 10 ad 2; 2-2, q. 58, a. 5). It is important for my purposes that Aquinas did not liken human beings to components of a heap of indistinguishable items, say, or to one of a homogeneous collection of atoms, but to the limbs of a living organism (2-2, q. 64, a. 2). The significance of this comparison lies in the fact that the limbs of organisms complement rather than duplicate one another. To be a human limb is to play one or another of a variety of functional roles in the working of the human being. Each of these roles has the functions it does because of the needs of the whole and because of the functions played by the other parts of the same organism. The com-

²⁰ See my "Natural Law, Property and Redistribution," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21 (1993) 165-80.

²¹ See *Summa contra gentiles* 3, chap. 3.

parison therefore suggests that members of political society may naturally be suited for different roles just as different parts of an organism are naturally suited to perform different functions. It further suggests that, as with an organism's parts, so with society's members these differences are complementary: parts of both kinds properly function for their own good and that of their respective wholes. This, in turn, suggests that to be a member of political society is to play a role defined in part by the functional roles played by others, in much the way that the limbs of a living organism play different and complementary roles. If we are to take seriously Aquinas's comparison between political society and a living organism, we should conclude that Aquinas holds a complementarity view of political membership.

Further evidence that Aquinas holds this view can be discerned in his discussion of equality and rulership in the state of innocence. In *ST* 1, q. 96, Aquinas considered what sorts of dominion would have been exercised had the fall never occurred. In q. 96, a. 4 he considered whether some human beings would have been subject to others had innocents multiplied to fill the earth. As prelude to that discussion, he asked in the immediately preceding article whether all would have been equal in a state of innocence. He argued that even had original sin not taken place, there would have been inequalities among human beings due to differences in age and sex. There would also, he thought, have been inequalities in physical strength and beauty and, more significantly, in justice and knowledge. Differences among the innocent could not be the result of sin. Rather they would be attributable to forces of nature and to developmental differences owing to differences in the diligent application even innocents would need in order to learn and to acquire the virtues (1, q. 96, a. 3 ad 3).

Aquinas's discussion of the state of innocence thus shows that he believed there are important differences among those who participate in the common good. He thought that the possibility of realizing that good depends crucially upon society's proper use of the differences there would be among those who participate in it. Since this dependence cannot be a consequence of sin, this suggests that Aquinas thought it part of the very idea of the common good of political society that it be realized in this way. If this is correct, then it in turn suggests it is essential that members of political society exhibit differences which can be harmonized to bring about their common good. It suggests, that is, that Aquinas endorses a complementarity view of political membership.

Aquinas did touch lightly on the work that would be done in the state of innocence (1, q. 102, a. 3), but he did not discuss the division of tasks that work would entail. Despite this lacuna, Aquinas made it clear that the best way to realize the common good of a society of innocents depends upon a social life in which the natural differences among human beings benefit all. He did so by taking up just the function that is crucial for my argument: the function of exercising political author-

ity. Having argued in 1, q. 96, a. 3 that there would be inequalities even among the innocent, he goes on to claim in 1, q. 96, a. 4 that it would be "unsuitable" if those inequalities were not used for the benefit of all. This, he concluded, implies that those preeminent in the skills needed for governing should exercise authority in order to guide each to his individual good and all to their common good. Of course there would be significant differences between that authority and political authority as we are familiar with it after the fall. Most notably, authority over the innocent would not be coercive, since there would be no need to coerce the sinless. Even so Aquinas thought it appropriate to describe prelapsarian authority as political.²² His treatment of the state of innocence thus shows that he thought societies should be arranged in such a way that differences among members are used for the benefit of all and that among the resultant arrangements are differences in the distribution of political authority. Combined with his comparison of society and a living organism, it suggests that those in a well-functioning society participate in its common good as members suited by nature and development for political authority or subjection. Taking his treatment of inequality and authority in the state of innocence together with the implications of his organic imagery suggests therefore that Aquinas's complementarity view has notable political implications.

It is important to distinguish these conclusions from other and stronger ones that I am not drawing. I am not claiming that Aquinas thought those who have the skills that would enable them to benefit all by ruling them have some natural entitlement to rule. Quite clearly an account of what makes someone qualified to exercise authority differs from an account of what legitimates a ruler's claim to political office. Thus the thought that some are better suited to govern than others is compatible with the thought that those who hold office do so legitimately simply in virtue of having entered office through customary procedures which might deny political authority to those most qualified to hold it. A member of society "preeminent" in wisdom and virtue but denied office could at most complain that things would be better if he were installed in one, but not that such a denial is unjust or that those who hold office do so illegitimately.²³

I do not claim that every difference among persons in relevant to membership in political society as conceived by Aquinas. Natural talent and training may make some well suited to occupations at which others would be mediocre or inept. These differences are important for many purposes. I have not, however, tried to argue that Aquinas

²² For an analysis of Aquinas's argument for this claim, see my "Augustine and Aquinas on Original Sin and the Function of Political Authority," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30 (1992) 353-76.

²³ See Mark Murphy, "Consent, Custom and the Common Good in Aquinas's Account of Political Authority," *Review of Politics* 59 (1997) 323-50.

thought persons enjoy the status of membership as persons possessed of the skills needed for carpentry or cobbling, or as practitioners of one or another craft. Possibly such an argument could be made,²⁴ but making it is not my intention here. It suffices for my purposes to show that Aquinas thought differences with respect to the capacity for ruling are relevant to political membership.

Finally, it is important to distinguish the complementarity view from what might be called the "great chain" view of political membership that draws its inspiration from the claim that species can be ordered by their excellence into a great chain of being. Those who read the great chain view into Aquinas interpret him as holding that the great chain of being is replicated within the human species. Aquinas, they state, thought that human beings within each society can be ordered according to their realized capacity for virtue. To paraphrase one interpreter, Aquinas thought they can be ordered according to their "wisdom and holiness."²⁵ According to this reading, he argued that political societies realize their common good best when political status mirrors the chain.

To understand that Aquinas should not be read as holding the great-chain view, one should note first that it implies that any two human beings, or any two in a given society, can be compared and ranked according to their moral excellence. This is an implausible claim requiring "all things considered" comparisons of good carpenters and good cobblers, or good carpenters and good lawyers. The standards for these comparisons would be very difficult to lay out and defend. Furthermore, one should recall that the resultant rankings are to be correlated with political status because those rankings reflect degrees of wisdom; societies best realize their common good, it might be said, when they are ruled by the wise. The problem with this argument is that different societies demand different skills of those in positions of power. Ruling a highly bureaucratized society governed by elaborate codes of civil, criminal, and canon law requires quite different skills from ruling a small, traditional society in which behavior is governed by custom. This poses a dilemma for proponents of the great-chain view. If we start with a ranking of persons according to moral excellence, it is hard to see why that ranking should correspond to the ranking of persons by their capacity to rule, once the diversity of circumstances in which authority is exercised is taken into account. If, on the other hand, the great-chain view holds only that human beings within each society can

²⁴ The argument might begin from Aquinas's claim that "something proper is due to each class of person according to his particular office" (2-2, q. 57, a. 4 ad 3); he cited priests, rulers and soldiers as examples.

²⁵ For what I call the "great chain view," see Samuel Beer, "The Rule of the Wise and the Holy: Hierarchy in the Thomistic System," *Political Theory* 14 (1986) 391-422. For convincing replies, see Brian Tierney, "Hierarchy, Consent and the 'Western Tradition,'" *Political Theory* 15 (1987) 646-52; also Murphy, "Consent, Custom and the Common Good."

be ranked by their possession of the skills needed to govern under their society's peculiar circumstances, then it is hard to see why this should also be a ranking according to moral excellence or how the resulting chain resembles the great chain of being that originally inspired the view. In either case the correspondence seems mere coincidence when it obtains at all. Nor will it do to assert a necessary connection between the form of practical reason needed to govern and that which is a chief ingredient in moral excellence. Many of the saints, Aquinas would have argued, had the latter but not the former. A more plausible interpretation of Aquinas reads him as holding the complementarity view. According to this interpretation, Aquinas recognized that there are politically relevant differences among members of society. But he was not committed either to the possibility of a complete ordering of political society's members or to the claim that those who are best suited to rule realize human excellence more fully than do those who are not.

Neither of the two arguments I used to impute the complementarity view to Aquinas—the one drawing on his organic imagery, and the one drawing on his discussion of the state of innocence—implies that difference between those suited to rule and those not suited coincides with the difference between adult male members of society on the one hand and women and slaves on the other. For one thing, nothing in Aquinas's comparison between society and a living organism suggests that he thought all adult men are parts or limbs of the same kind. Rather the comparison suggests that just as limbs can complement one another in the functioning of an organism, so adult men can complement one another in promoting and enjoying the common good. Adult men, it suggests, stand in relationship of complementarity to one another as members of political society.

Decisive on this point is Aquinas's discussion of the authority some persons would have over others in the state of innocence. There he distinguishes the governance of slaves from rule over those who are free. The rule that would be exercised by the preeminent in the state of innocence would, he says, be rule of the latter kind rather than the former. There are two reasons for thinking that he included some adult men among those who are naturally suited to subjection rather than to rule. The first is that if only women, or only women and slaves, fell into this category, Aquinas would be much more likely to assimilate rule in the state of innocence to the rule of a *paterfamilias* or a husband than to political rule. But as mentioned earlier, there are good reasons for thinking that the rulership he thought would be exercised there would be specifically political. So the very fact that Aquinas talks of political rule in this connection strongly suggests that he thought some men are naturally suited for political subjection. The second is that Aquinas thought freedom requires, at minimum, the developed capacity to engage in rational deliberation, to adopt ends, and to schedule their pursuit. But he also thought that these are the capacities of practical

reason in which women exhibit relative deficiency and hence are naturally subject to their husbands. It follows, then, that women are incapable of the freedom characteristic of those who would be subject in the state of innocence. The free persons who are suited to subjection in the state of innocence must be, or at least include, adult men.

I have already broached the objection that what makes Aquinas's political thought undemocratic are his views about women and slaves. Here I have tried to argue that Aquinas endorsed a complementarity view of political membership. I have also argued that as Aquinas understands the complementarity view, there are politically relevant differences, not only between women and slaves on the one hand and men on the other, but among adult men as well. If, as I have urged, Aquinas's political thought is undemocratic because of his endorsement of the complementarity view, it follows that its undemocratic character runs deeper than that objection suggests.

Let me conclude this section by showing the analogues of the four points I made about domestic complementarity. First, different persons are suited to the performance of different tasks in the society to which they belong. These differences result from differences in motivational structure and capacities for practical reason, which in turn result from differences in natural endowment, training, application and, after the fall, differences in virtue and vice. Second, the differences among persons in a *societas perfecta* are complementary so that, other things being equal, those living in society can realize the common good of various associations and of the whole, and thereby their own goods, when and only when each engages in the task for which he or she is suited. Third, Aquinas endorses a complementarity view of political membership. According to this view, the notion of membership in a *societas perfecta*, of participation in its common good, is defined by reference to the performance of one or another role. Fourth, because the complementary roles with respect to which membership is defined are the roles of ruler and subject, the complementarity view of membership has obvious implications for the distribution of political authority. In performing the task of governing a society, the ruler must direct society so that each realizes his own good and all realize their common good.

There are important differences between the complementarity of members of a *societas perfecta* and other forms of complementarity. The complementarity of males and females with respect to reproduction is related exclusively to their distinctive biological features. Aquinas might well have claimed that the complementarity of husbands and wives with respect to domestic life is connected with their biological differences, but he would no doubt have continued that the nature of the connection is sufficiently complex to mark a significant distinction between reproductive and domestic complementarities. Perhaps Aquinas thought that complementarities with respect to rule and subjection could, at least in some societies, be connected with

biological endowments such as physical strength. But because of the variabilities of human social and political life, the connection will be a contingent one that holds only in a few societies. In other societies, it will depend upon differences in temperament, virtue, and ability. Despite these dissimilarities, the fact that there are political analogues to the four points made about domestic complementarity shows that complementarity is an analogous term. It also shows that the notion of complementarity is central to Aquinas's analysis of politics, as it is to his treatment of reproduction and domestic life. Thus his political thought can be seen as continuing a theme running through his analyses of other important forms of human sociability. That there is such a continuity in a writer as systematic as Aquinas is not surprising. But precisely because of this continuity, framing a Thomist politics that is democratic would require significant revisions in Aquinas's social thought.

POLITICAL COMPLEMENTARITY AND DEMOCRATIC THOMISM

One reason for seeking a democratic Thomism is that the implications of denying democratic views of political equality strike modern sensibilities as objectionable. Someone might try to defend the complementarity view by pointing out a suppressed premise of the objection. The complementarity view of political membership seems objectionable, it might be argued, only because access to political power is thought to convey access to money, honor, and privilege, because rulers so often govern for their own benefit rather than for the common good, and because those in positions of power and privilege tend to obscure the injustice of their situation by claiming moral superiority. But, Aquinas's defender might continue, this happens only in corrupt societies. In societies that function reasonably well, rulership is just one among the many functions that needs to be performed if the common good is to be achieved. In a well-functioning society, rulers will govern for the common good rather than their own. No more honor, wealth, or privilege need accrue to persons who fulfill that function than would accrue to those who perform the functions of fishing or farming or soldiering. Thus while Aquinas's political thought may be undemocratic, it is not objectionably so.

The claim that exercising political authority ought to be regarded as a function on all fours with farming might be tenable for the ideal case of a society of innocents, the salient feature of which is that it realizes an integrative common good. But in the actual societies of Aquinas's time and our own, things are different. The governments of Aquinas's time lacked the reach and the concentration of power characteristic of the modern state. Even so, attending to the pretensions and the workings of those governments would have taught Aquinas that rulership cannot simply be reckoned as one social function among many. Privilege of various kinds accrues to those who hold positions of political power in the modern world; the same was true of the medieval one.

Any theory of politics that can be put into practice only if this does not happen is patently utopian. Furthermore there is no indication that Aquinas would have been sympathetic to the reply imagined on his behalf. That he would have distanced himself from it seems clear from a remark in his one explicitly political work. In *De regno*, book 1, chapter 15, Aquinas claimed that the king "should rule over all human offices and direct them by the power of his rule." The recurrence of Aquinas's familiar organic imagery in that work drives this point home. In the first chapter of *De regno* he noted that "among the members of a body, one, such as the heart or the head, is the principal and moves all others." In the very next sentence, Aquinas likened a ruler to that principal bodily part.²⁶

A Thomistic politics that addresses the contemporary world must come to grips with those features of government that motivate democratic theory: the central distributive role of the modern state and its claim to a monopoly on justified coercion. To this pair of modern conditions I would add another: the spread of democratic theory itself and with it the conviction that persons are roughly as described by democratic theories. A number of students of Aquinas have attempted to grapple with these conditions while remaining faithful to his views. The result has been a variety of democratic Thomisms. Yet if my arguments are correct, there is something profoundly undemocratic about the Thomism of Thomas himself. It follows that the democratic Thomisms that have emerged in the last half-century have appeared only because those who framed them exercised genuine intellectual inventiveness. Documenting their innovations and tracing the path from the complementarity view of Thomas to the democracy of various 20th-century Thomisms lie far beyond what I can do here.²⁷ Instead, I close with two conjectures.

I have not said Aquinas made no use whatever of the notion of political equality. His discussion of commutative justice shows that status is irrelevant to the justice of many transactions among persons (2-2, q. 61, a. 3). Moreover I believe Aquinas thought that a well-functioning political society would treat its members as equals in that, moral luck aside, each could realize his or her good in that society provided one chooses reasonably rightly. There is a sense, then, in which each member of society is an equal participant in the common good. This conception of political equality does not suffice to render Aquinas's thought democratic in the face of his endorsement of the complementarity view. My first conjecture is that the task of formulating a democratic Thomism was accomplished by reinterpreting Aquinas's claim that the common good must benefit every member of society in light of modern conditions. Since the power of the modern

²⁶ I am indebted to Blake Leyerle for suggesting this point.

²⁷ Compare Drew Christiansen, "On Relative Equality: Catholic Egalitarianism after Vatican II," *TS* 45 (1984) 651-75.

state bulks large among those conditions, later Thomists felt compelled to argue that the common good could benefit every member only if political authority were no longer distributed in accord with the complementarity view. To do this, they had to frame a different conception of political membership than the one Aquinas endorsed.

This is not to say that John Courtney Murray and Jacques Maritain, let alone John Finnis, John XXIII, or John Paul II, simply took over the egalitarian view of political membership as articulated in secular democratic theory. I indicated at the outset that John XXIII was tentative in his endorsement of democracy and that John Paul II entertains serious reservations about it, particularly as it is found in the industrialized West. Murray's antipathy toward what he calls "totalitarian democracy" is well known to students of his work.²⁸ Maritain rejected what he regarded as a similar view in Rousseau.²⁹ Thus the various democratic Thomisms I have already cited modify Aquinas's thought in important ways while maintaining some distance from secular democratic theory. This distance is what one would expect, given the different objectives of the theories. I have stressed that secular democratic theories, in the grand tradition from Locke through Rousseau to Habermas and Rawls, are motivated by an interest in giving members of political society some control over and autonomy from the modern state. The conceptions of political membership on which these theories rely dovetail with this commitment to self-government. Democratic Thomists have a quite different motivation. Their interest is in finding a form of government that promotes human solidarity to the extent that political arrangements can. Democracy has value, they think, insofar as it is the form of government that can best promote solidarity under modern conditions.

This brings me to my second conjecture. Democratic Thomisms accept an egalitarian conception of political membership, but modify it to suit distinctively Catholic conceptions of solidarity and the associated notion of human dignity. Scholarly examination of these democratic Thomisms would show that they neither recapitulate the past nor capitulate to modernity. Instead they are the products of careful engagement with theories both old and new, both inside and outside the tradition of Catholic thought. It is such critical engagement, rather than the wholesale rejection or total appropriation of new ideas, that accounts for the vitality of a living tradition of thought.

There is of course no intrinsic value to novelty. The very thing that makes an idea new—that it has never been tried before—may well be explained by the fact that it is not worth trying. Even ideas that are worth trying, like democracy, can be abused. If members of society are conceived of as agents in equal possession of the developed capacities needed to govern themselves, then there will be an obvious philosoph-

²⁸ See Murray, "The Church and Totalitarian Democracy," *TS* 13 (1952) 525-63.

²⁹ Maritain, *Man and the State* 17-18.

ical problem about how we are to conceive of those who have not yet developed those capacities and of those who have already lost them through age or infirmity.³⁰ Where this philosophical problem arises, a political one could easily follow: we may cease to count them as members of our political community and as persons entitled to full protection. Hence the reservations John Paul II has about democracy are not without foundation.

Despite that, there is a great deal to be said for the view that the development of democratic thought and practice since the Enlightenment has not merely provided new social circumstances in which human dignity and solidarity must be realized. It has also taught the Church important truths about the value of diversity and the good of tolerating it, about what it is to be an equal member of society, about the value of the individual, and about what it is for an individual to be created in God's image, equal in dignity to the rest of God's children. To the extent that it has absorbed these lessons, the Church is in a better position to call society to account when it fails to live up to the most defensible version of the ideals it purports to espouse. This is precisely what the U.S. Catholic bishops tried to do in their pastoral letter on the American economic life³¹ and what John Paul II tried to do in *Evangelium vitae*.

For those who share this view, the invention of various democratic Thomisms stand as an object lesson: There is hope for moral and theological progress if we are willing to do the hard work of confronting new political trends and movements of thought in all their complexity. To do this work well we need patiently to immerse ourselves in systems of thought that many in our tradition regard as incompatible with it and to discern what truth can be found in the signs of the times. There is no better example to follow in this endeavor than that of Thomas Aquinas himself.³²

³⁰ See Allen Buchanan, "Justice as Reciprocity versus Subject-Centered Justice," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 19 (1990) 227-52.

³¹ *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington: USCC, 1986), esp. para. 95.

³² As Umberto Eco wrote on the 500th-anniversary of Aquinas's death, "it is surely licit to ask what Thomas Aquinas would do if he were alive today; but we would have to answer that, in any case, he would not write another *Summa Theologica*. He would come to terms with Marxism, with the physics of relativity, with formal logic, with existentialism and phenomenology. He would comment not on Aristotle, but on Marx and Freud. . . . And finally he would realize that one cannot and must not work out a definitive, concluded system, like a piece of architecture, but a sort of mobile system, a loose-leaf *Summa*, because in his encyclopedia of the sciences the notion of historical temporariness would have entered. . . . I know for sure that he would take part in the celebrations of his anniversary only to remind us that it is not a question of deciding how still to use what he thought, but to think new things. Or at least to learn from him how you can think cleanly, like a man of your own time" (Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986] 267-68).



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