



## What is Political Philosophy?

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This lecture was given to undergraduate students of Politics at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019. In this talk I would like to discuss the contemporary perspective of politics. I will then explain why the human person is at the centre of all political considerations. I will point to some fundamental characteristics of human existence and show their relevance to politics, and I will finish by suggesting what we can do.

### I

Today there is an almost universal scepticism towards 'politics' and there are many reasons for this disenchantment; the various political scandals, corruption, economic dishonesty, self-serving interests by those who are supposed to be public servants, the sheer bureaucratic incompetence of big government, and so on. Even the magic word 'democracy' has lost its charm. Just over two weeks ago, Saturday, 9<sup>th</sup> of November, marked the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. There was a big difference between the euphoric scenes of people breaking down the wall and clambering from East to West Germany in 1989, and the muted celebrations a few weeks ago.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *How Liberalism became 'the god that failed' in eastern Europe* article, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Guardian*, 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

I suggest that our disillusionment with politics has deeper roots than the latest round of dispiriting news from the centres of politics around the world. Fundamental discouragement, I propose, is not just with the institutions of politics, but also *within us* as a people. A fundamental characteristic of our times is that we seem to share with politics a postmodern disillusionment with visions and ideals. Maybe, therefore, our politics is a projection and a reflection of our own general disillusion with meaning, purpose, and aspiration. Contrast, for example, the cautious Immanuel Kant, writing in 1792, 3 years into the French Revolution, in an essay entitled with the question: *Whether the Human Race is Continually Advancing toward the Better?*

‘Violence on the part of the mighty will gradually diminish, obedience to the laws will increase...men will see themselves obliged first to render the greatest obstacle to morality, namely war, little by little more humane, then less frequent, and finally, in the shape of aggressive wars, to abolish it altogether...’<sup>2</sup>

with a description by a contemporary political philosopher of our postmodern times:

‘The age that began with the glory of the Enlightenment, and the energies of the scientific, industrial, and political revolutions has devolved into the horror, vacuity, and mediocrity of the twentieth century’.<sup>3</sup>

We have been humiliated by the collective failures of 20<sup>th</sup> century humanity that have broken up the dreams and confidence of Enlightened modernity and we live and have become accustomed to non-belief, mistrust, and the absence of noble aspirations.

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<sup>2</sup> IMMANUEL KANT, *Whether the Human Race is Continually Advancing toward the Better?* section 7, 1792.

<sup>3</sup> D. WALSH, *After Ideology*, HarperCollins, San Francisco 1990, 9.

## II

Ancient Egyptian and Babylonian thought considered human society to be a type of micro-cosmos, a miniature reflection of the patterns and rhythms of the cosmos. It was perhaps Plato who first recognised that human society, the society of the *polis*, political society, was not determined in a micro-cosmic way, but was much more a *macro-anthropos*, that is, that political society was a reflection of the human soul, good or bad, just or unjust.<sup>4</sup> Politics, therefore, starts with man.

I teach Political Philosophy. I teach that man (man and woman, each with his and her integral complementary perfection) is called to an ideal of transcendent personal and social destiny, of which political life forms an integral, but not exclusive or final, part. What does that mean?

First, that we are structurally beings of hope, that is, we are necessarily drawn to a future fulfilment beyond this existence, to which everything in this existence draws us. In Scholastic terms we are *homo viator*, not by choice but structurally, necessarily. The German philosopher J. Pieper, to explain this structural state of hope, uses the image of the arrow in flight, directed to a real ideal beyond this present existence. Death is, therefore, the end of this existence, but not the purpose, or end, as philosophers say, of our lives. In Italian there's a difference between *la fine* and *il fine*; death is *la fine* (the end) of this present existence but not *il fine* (the purpose) of this existence. Therefore, in philosophical language, we are destined, structured, *to transcend* this existence. All things here and now, including the affairs of politics, do and should point to this transcendent destiny.

Secondly, we are relational beings, beings who are also relations, subsistent relations. Again, what does that mean? It means that we humans are persons, that is, drawn to others and to the Other, as the fulfilment of ourselves, as beings. We are drawn to a greater unity, and the more we are drawn to that greater unity, we become more fully ourselves. It is the opposite of the law of matter, which is the more I give,

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. E. VOEGELIN, *Order and History*, vol.2, 227, cited in Dante Germino, Eric Voegelin's contribution to Modern Political Philosophy, *The Review of Politics*, 26 (1964), 390: «In Heraclitus the idea of an order of the soul begins to form which in Plato unfolds into the perennial principle of political science: that the right order of the soul through philosophy furnishes the standard for the right order of society».

the less I have for myself. The human spirit, incarnated in matter, has an opposite law; the more I open myself in relation to others and to the Other, the more I become who I am. It is the metaphysical law of love of the human person. This was the primary philosophical concern of the philosopher K. Wojtyła, who, as John Paul II, expressed the metaphysical law of love in this way:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, we are beings in truth and freedom. We, as humans, have an ordered structure (what the Scholastics called a *nature*, characteristically human actions that flow from an essence of being human) and we live in a structured (ordered) world or universe. We therefore discover meaning, design, purpose, goodness in what *is* (what in Latin is *res*, from which we derive our word *reality*, what *is*). We are immersed in reality, we are part of reality, and what we know of reality we call truth. This is how a contemporary Thomistic philosopher describes our being in truth:

It is our destiny, written into us by the very structure of our nature, to be the ones to listen to being, as it reveals itself to us through the mute message of its action, interpret its significance, gather into unity its multifarious voices, speak out the logos of Being (as mediated by the many beings which are its bearers), and respond accordingly by our own action.<sup>6</sup>

Not only that, but as a curious characteristic of our existence, we are required to accept, adapt reality to ourselves and ourselves to reality, by our own willingness. That condition is called freedom, a human condition circumscribed by reality. It is a personal response to reality,

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<sup>5</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor hominis*, n.10.

<sup>6</sup> W.N. CLARKE, *Explorations in Metaphysics*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1995, 54.

unlike inanimate beings; a tree, for example, is and becomes more what it is. We, as persons, are and yet only become more who we are by our active personal free response.

Fourthly, we are strangely fragile moral beings. Many philosophers, Christian and non-Christian, in different ways, have noticed this strange human phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> Partisan ideologies will point out good people and especially bad people (like the bourgeoisie, fascists, right-wing extremists, sometimes left-wing extremists, etc.) and one will be put into an ideological category of good and bad according to whether one finds oneself agreeing or disagreeing with what the ideology proposes. But the line between good and bad, as the Russian dissident A. Solzhenitsyn wrote in the *Gulag Archipelago*, runs right through each human heart.<sup>8</sup> We are each one of us both good and bad, and we can become better or worse according to our free response to reality. Not only that, we are not just flawed ourselves, but the rupture is social as well. This was a theme of the Fathers of the Church: according to St. Cyril of Alexandria ‘Satan has broken us up’. Speaking of Adam (the human race), as he is found today, St. Augustine says: ‘Originally one, he has fallen, and, breaking up as it were, he has filled the whole earth with the pieces’.<sup>9</sup> We are those pieces. What is important to remember is that this social rupture was not how we were intended to be (our original state) nor how we are destined to be (our final state).

Finally, we are religious beings. What I do not mean here is that we all have our own private religious beliefs that should be respected. We do, and they should be respected. No, what I mean is that all of reality bears religious significance, is structured by Him Who IS, reflects Him, and has its ultimate meaning and purpose in Him. He is the Source of reality and its destiny. For man, too, this apprehension of The Personal Being, whom we recognise and call the Lord God, is

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, P. HENRICI, «The Philosophers and Original Sin», *Communio* 18 (1991), 489-501.

<sup>8</sup> A. SOLZHENITSYN, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956*, Paris 1973.

<sup>9</sup> H. DE LUBAC, *Catholicism. Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1988, 34. A very interesting political application of these quotations of the Fathers is found in W. CAVANAUGH, *Theopolitical Imagination*, Tand T Clark International, London 2003, 9-15.

something to which we are essentially structured. The great Rumanian phenomenologist and philosopher of religion, Mircea Eliade, wrote that:

On the most archaic levels of culture, living, considered as being human, is in itself a religious act...In other words, to be – or, rather, to become – a man signifies being ‘religious’.<sup>10</sup>

The religious phenomenon is based, I suggest, on philosophically evident principles, so that, whatever the speculative explanations of the Personal Source and Destiny of all of reality, ourselves included, on a practical level, this ultimate context of reality cannot be left out, in good faith. The *a priori* assumption of *etsi Deus non daretur* (as if God did not exist) is dishonest and dangerous.

### III

So what has all this to do with politics? The real question (and the philosophical approach demands us to ask the right questions), is not how all of this affects politics, but rather how ‘politics’ can help man achieve his and her transcendent social destiny.<sup>11</sup>

If we understand the political is a legitimate and limited area of civil public authority, then I think that the meaning of some basic notions of politics can and should be renewed, based on what I have been mentioning about man. Let me suggest a few:

- First of all, politics has to do with people before structures and institutions. The French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, commenting on the new American democratic system of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, saw that democracy was based on *instituta et mores*, structures and what we might loosely call today ‘values’.<sup>12</sup> He saw that mere structures,

<sup>10</sup> M. ELIADE, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, University of Chicago Press, XIII.

<sup>11</sup> In a similar way, Y. Simon inverts the normal question as to the ethical dimension of politics; Simon, correctly in my view, asks about the necessary political dimension of ethics. ‘The best way to perceive the ethical character of politics is to realise fully the political character of ethics’, in *A General Theory of Authority*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1980, 141.

<sup>12</sup> A. DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*, cited in J. Ratzinger’s essay *Eschatology and Utopia, Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, Ignatius Press, 2008, lc.3676.

whatever system of division of powers, of universal franchise, is only as good as the values (*mores*) by which people live. The Legislature, Parliament, due process of law by a system of courts, elections...are no guarantee of justice and equity, if the people are not just and equitable. Curiously, J. Ratzinger noticed an ideological similarity between Communism and Western materialism in the notion that:

‘morality is shifted away from man to the structures...that morality is produced by the economy (instead of the economy being shaped, ultimately, by fundamental human decisions’.<sup>13</sup>

Both the dialectic materialism of Marxism and the technical materialism of the West trust that structures will of themselves make people good. In contrast, the German-American political philosopher E. Voegelin, echoing Plato and his *macro-anthropos* principle, said that ‘*the right order of the soul through philosophy furnishes the standard for the right order of society*’.<sup>14</sup>

- In second place, politics requires a common good. One of the unfortunate consequences of the contractual forms of state theory (that we are naturally separated individuals and we bargain our way into society to get a better deal for ourselves) is that there is no real *common* good worth speaking of. In different ways, Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas, among many others, understood that man is structurally oriented to the common good achieved in the society of others. The contractual theorists such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, etc., did not think so. In different ways, they held that the political project was about protecting and preserving the individual, his life, his property and his interests. This is one of the assumed suppositions of political and economic liberalism today. As laudable as the intentions of J. Rawls were, his *Theory of Justice* was about justice as fairness. It is hard to get excited about politics if it is just about neutral social fairness. The phrase ‘common good’ does and should mean much more, especially in politics.

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<sup>13</sup> J. RATZINGER, A Christian Orientation in a Pluralistic Democracy, in *Church, Ecu-  
menism and Politics*, lc. 3023.

<sup>14</sup> E. VOEGELIN, *Order and History* II, 227, quoted in D. Germino, E. Voegelin’s Con-  
tribution to Contemporary Political Theory, *The Review of Politics*, 26 (July) 1964, 390.

- Another thing; we speak a lot today about is 'ethics', but I have seen that many times ethics is reduced to some agreed minimum set of rules and regulations (what we agree not to do, if indeed we do arrive at any agreement). For the Ancient philosophers of Greece, and many more, what is most fundamental to binding society together was friendship - love – and not primarily the obligation of law. This is why, for example, the theme of friendship appears where it does in Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics, the first part of one work of which the second part is his Politics. We, today, are told that the goal of society is 'the economy', the part of it that works for me. Is that all we are capable of or aspire to as human persons? The concept of good means much more than what commands a price; there is moral good (honesty, generosity, love...) and there is religious good (having a sense of the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, the necessary experience of the Absolute Personal Being in our lives, etc.). In a remarkable essay, J. Ratzinger comments on this. The title of the essay is indicative: *That Which Holds The World Together: The Pre-Political Foundations of Constitutional Democracy*.<sup>15</sup> Ratzinger points out that constitutional democracy presupposes, of necessity, people who are capable of perceiving ethical and religious good. Without this capacity and contribution, democracy lives beyond its means and becomes bankrupt. Politics needs to offer us better quality goods.

- Politics and truth. Today our democracies are based on the opinions of majorities; it is the majority opinion that prevails. But Plato had a problem with 'opinions'. An opinion refers to the view of someone in particular; it is the criterion of ownership, but not necessarily the criterion of truth, of what really *is*. There are right and wrong opinions, there are informed and ignorant opinions, there are reasoned and groundless opinions. Relativism, in this context, means that the only thing we humans are capable of is adding up the number of opinions and deciding by numerical majority. But we know that there is the truth of reality to be respected in politics. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 was a declaration that was universally acknowledged about the truth of every man and woman. Those truths are what we all know and

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<sup>15</sup> J. RATZINGER, *Europe Today and Tomorrow. Addressing the Fundamental Issues*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2007, 67-80.



declare; it is not a matter of opinion. The truth of reality is not always easy to acknowledge, it is not always what we would like to be true, but nothing is gained in the name of tolerance or respect by denying our capacity to know what is right, what is truly good. We need the criterion of truth to sift through our opinions and to hold on the what *is*, and discard what *is not*.

- Freedom today is considered as the greatest political good. Almost everything is justified in terms of having the right to choose freely. Here there is a fundamental confusion about freedom; freedom as a condition of choice is being made into freedom as an end (purpose) of choice. We are – and should be – free to choose – but to choose good. We are structurally oriented to what is good, to distinct and complementary goods, that are in reality good and we respond freely to their attraction. Augustine would have found our understanding of ‘free market’ strange. We define the market as free when it is free from constraint (assuming that it ever really is); Augustine would ask us what the market is free *for*. We do know what goods are good for man; if politics and economics, in some real way do not propose those goods, then politics and economics do not help us *to be*, they do not help us freely to be more.

This is particularly relevant to the doctrine of human rights. The medieval notion of right, *ius*, meant being a part of *iustitia*, that is, conforming to the order (structure) of reality, what is right and therefore just. For different reasons, the modern notion of *ius* came to mean a power of freedom, just being free. Unfortunately, mere social power of freedom has another name -anarchy, and this is what we are getting today through the misuse of the term ‘*ius*’ or right’. This happens when freedom as a condition is misunderstood as freedom as an end (or purpose).

#### IV

To conclude, what are we to do? We can launch into politics formally – perhaps some of you will – and build up with others a renewed vision of the *polis*, of truly human society. This is very necessary and it is encouraging when I hear students from different parts of the world

speak not only of the disillusionment with what is on offer, but the desire to build something new. This is very necessary.

There is also the personal way of politics, which is the way of living not only privately but living publicly in the truth, especially in public situations of untruths or half-truths, or aggressive attacks on those who choose to speak freely and truthfully, without fear. Vaclav Havel, the first freely elected president of what was Czechoslovakia, did this. In his essay called *The Power of the Powerless*, he encouraged ordinary people to refuse to live the lie of the political ideology in the small things of their everyday lives.<sup>16</sup> But even more so, he called on ordinary people to live the truth of their lives in public and in that way awaken in others the dormant truth of their lives; this universal truth is the political power of the powerless.

I may just end with the example of German university students in Munich during the Second World War who lived the truth publicly and distributed it to their student friends in the face of overwhelming persecution from the regime in power. Their little group was known as the *Die Weisse Rose* and they paid for the truth with their lives. But in the end, politics is not about power, but about truth, and truth stays and, in the end, prevails. For that reason, a true definition of politics is not to do with winning and maintaining power, but living publicly in the truth, or, as E. Voegelin wrote, politics 'is the science of right order in society'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> VACLAV HAVEL ET AL., *The Power of the Powerless. Citizens against the state in central-eastern Europe*, Routledge, London 2015.

<sup>17</sup> E. Voegelin's Contribution..., 390.