

**Thomas Aquinas' *De Regno*:
Political Philosophy, Theocracy, and Esoteric Writing**

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Although the growth of neo-Thomist scholarship in the past century has led to a resurgence in the scholarship devoted to Thomas Aquinas' political thought, much of the attention has focused on the account of politics given in Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, with very limited attention being paid to his *De Regno*. Indeed, even the scholarship that takes account of *De Regno* subordinates it to the *Summa*, attempting to fit it into the account of politics given there. There are two drawbacks to such an approach. First, as its title suggests, and its first question makes clear, the *Summa* is a work of theology rather than political science. In contrast, the aim of Aquinas' treatise on kingship is overtly political – *De Regno* is written to the King of Cyprus. And while it may be replied that theology encompasses the study of politics, it is also clear that they are distinguishable fields of study.¹ The second drawback parallels the first. The subordination of *De Regno* – by which I mean the attempt to make *De Regno* a part of the argument of the *Summa* – fails to take account of the context in which the arguments are presented.² It is not surprising, then, that many commentators struggle to reconcile the arguments of the two works, particularly the problem that the *Summa* favors a mixed regime while *De Regno* favors kingship. Conversely, we intend to show that when the arguments of *De Regno* are viewed in light of the context of the work itself, the treatise turns out to have a deeper teaching than its arguments first reveal.

De Regno treats two issues inseparable from the roots of political philosophy: the best form of government and the problem of tyranny. It is my contention that Aquinas addresses these two issues by presenting theology as an alternative to the tradition of ancient political philosophy and, in so doing, attempts a new founding of politics that aims at a government that addresses the ideal form of the government while simultaneously securing that government against the danger of tyranny. This reformulation of both the best form of government and the possibility of that government being instituted on earth depends on Aquinas' account of the proper reward of the king, an account that removes the limits on the good allowed by a political life by reorienting that life toward the unlimited good of God.

My argument has two parts. First, I explore Aquinas' account of government, attempting to reconcile the claim that kingship is the best and safest form of government with his pressing concern for the prevention of tyranny. Here I show that the reconciliation of these two aims depends upon an extraordinarily strict definition of kingship that only becomes clear upon a close reading of the text. I argue that because this strict definition is almost impossible to fulfill,

¹ Aquinas writes: "Sacred doctrine, being one, extends to things which belong to different philosophical sciences because it considers in each the same formal aspect, namely, so far as they can be known through divine revelation. Hence, although among the philosophical sciences one is speculative and another practical, nevertheless sacred doctrine includes both; as God, by one and the same science, knows both Himself and His works. Still, it is speculative rather than practical because it is more concerned with divine things than with human acts".

² For examples of such approaches see: John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political and Legal Theory*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 262; Mark C. Murphy, "Consent, Custom, and the Common Good in Aquinas's Account of Political Authority", *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 2. (Spring, 1997), pp. 323-350; James M. Blythe, "The Mixed Constitution and the Distinction between Regal and Political Power in the Work of Thomas Aquinas", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 47, No. 4. (Oct. - Dec., 1986), pp. 547-565.

the implication is almost all “kings” rule as tyrants. Confirming and paralleling this argument is Aquinas’ treatment of the proper reward of the king and its connection to the all encompassing virtue of magnanimity. By addressing magnanimity, I argue, Aquinas reminds us of the difficulty of Aristotle’s magnanimous man receiving his due reward of honour, a problem he solves by appealing to the reward offered by God. The second and shorter part of the paper attempts to draw out the implications of these teachings for political philosophy. By reorienting political life toward the unlimited of God, Aquinas attempts to bring into question the claim that the self-sufficient life of philosophy is the best way of life. As in the first part, Aquinas’ solution to the critique of this claim depends on a turn to theology. Reason is sustainable only by an appeal to faith.

Kingship, Tyranny and the Structure of Government

De Regno introduces itself as a work concerned with “the origin of a kingdom and what pertains to the king’s office” (5).³ The treatise, he writes, “is in keeping with my calling and office,” and has been undertaken after “I considered with myself what I should undertake that would be worthy of royal majesty” (5). Aquinas, then, begins the treatise, not by stating that his aim is to offer something worthy of the King of Cyprus, but rather that he intends something worthy of “royal majesty”. The treatise will show kingship in its highest form and it implicitly invites the King of Cyprus to aim at this form. And, as is evidenced by Aquinas’ reference to “Him who is King of kings and Lord of lords, by Whom kings reign”, this form is inseparable from the rule of the Christian God, who is a “King above all gods” (5).

Chapter one of *De Regno* begins with a series of ennobling observations about the character of kingship. A king, writes Aquinas, “is one who rules over the community of a city or province, and for the common good” (10). Kingship is the best form of government because it best fulfills the end of government, which is “the good and well-being of a community united in fellowship” (10). Kingship can fulfill this end because its nature is rule by one, a fact that allows for “the unity of peace” necessary for direction and movement toward this end (rule by more than one, at best, can “only approach one” and so cannot be unified [10]). This argument, asserts Aquinas, is supported both by revelation (he interprets Ezekiel 37:24 to mean that “there should be one who rules” [9]) and by nature, for, “those things are best which are most natural, for in every case nature operates for the best” (11).

Because Aquinas is not blind to the apparent difficulties facing kingship, he moves from a consideration of the ideal to a consideration of two practical objections facing that ideal. The most significant of these objections is that kingship allows for the possibility of tyranny, which Aquinas recognizes as the worst form of government. Secondly, men living under a king are often “reluctant to exert themselves for the common good, no doubt supposing that whatever they do for the common good will not benefit them but someone else” (15).

Tyranny, writes Aquinas, is the worst and the “most unjust form of government,” in part because it leads to “few virtuous men” (12). This effect of tyranny stems from the aims of the tyrant who, because of a concern for his own private good, is led to despise the common good. A king who is a tyrant is “a man who rules without reason according to the lusts of his own soul,” and so “is no different from a beast” (14).⁴ Moreover, because the tyrant is ruled by fear,

³ Unless otherwise noted, all references are to R. W. Dyson’s translation of *De Regno* in *Aquinas: Political Writings*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.)

⁴ It is crucial to note that Aquinas speaks of kingship in two ways. First, as I have outlined, he speaks of it as the ideal form of government defined by its concern for the common good. Second, as is revealed in his discussion of

he suspects “good men rather than bad, and is always afraid of another’s virtue,” leading him to oppress his subjects in bodily and spiritual matters (13). In complete opposition to the ideal king (who unifies what is good), a tyrant allows for the unification of evil, a unification that allows evil to do its greatest harm. In other words, the possibility of tyranny is the most significant objection to kingship, for if corrupted, a kingship will become a tyranny, and a tyranny is the worst form of government.

Aquinas responds to this objection by indicating his willingness to turn away from a whole-hearted commitment to the ideal form of government. “We ought,” he argues, “to avoid that alternative from which great danger is more likely to follow” (16). Yet, surprisingly and against all expectations, even by this criteria, Aquinas continues to maintain that kingship is the best form of government, arguing that it is rule by many (and not rule by one) that admits the greatest possibility of tyranny (16). And even on those rare occasions that tyranny does arise out of kingship, this tyranny will be less extreme than any that arises from other forms of government (16). In the end, therefore,

If...one man rules, he will more often attend to the common good, or, if he turns aside from the task of securing the common good, it does not immediately follow that he will set about oppressing his subjects and become an extreme tyrant, which, as we have shown above, is the worst kind of bad government. The perils which arise out of government by many are therefore more to be avoided than those which arise out of government by one (17).

Kingship, then, is endorsed by two arguments. It is endorsed because it is the best form of government and it is endorsed because it is the least dangerous when compared with the other alternatives. Yet, if this is simply the case, why does Aquinas immediately turn to a discussion of how to best limit the dangers of tyranny? Why does he write that the king’s power must be restricted (18)? And why does he suggest that the people should have the power to choose, depose, and/or restrain a king if his rule becomes overly tyrannical (20)?⁵ In other words, if the *unity* of kingship provides the best and safest form of government, why does Aquinas recommend restricting the king’s power by *dividing* part of it among the least unified political class?

Aquinas forces us to reconsider the nature of kingship. By arguing that the unity of kingship provides the best and safest form of government and recommending the division of the ruler’s power, Aquinas implicitly points out that the fulfillment of his definition of kingship is

tyranny, he also uses it in a way that only indicates rule by one. In practical terms, the fact that the King of Cyprus is a king does not mean that he fulfills the definition of kingship as presented by Aquinas – he may be a tyrant.

⁵ In this passage, Aquinas suggests a form of mixed government by introducing the possibility that it is best if the people have some sort of check on the king’s power. Similarly, he speaks favorably about the Roman attempt at mixed government. The Roman people, he writes, burdened with tyranny and therefore wishing “to exchange kingship for aristocracy” (15), expelled their kings and replaced them with magistrates and consuls. The resultant liberty led to Rome’s swift growth, thereby illustrating that people who are ruled by tyrannical kings,

are reluctant to exert themselves for the common good, no doubt supposing that whatever they do for the common good will not benefit them but someone else who is seen to have the goods of the community under his own power. But if no one person is seen to have such power, they no longer regard the common good as if it belonged to someone else, but each now regards it as his own. (15)

The lesson, it seems, is that a proper kingship is in part defined by its ability to include the people in the practice of governing. It is not simply to say, however, that we should necessarily turn away from kingship, for, as Aquinas points out, the Roman abandonment of kingship led to a harmful divisiveness that compelled the reinstitutionalization of a kingship that was again defined by tyranny. (Aquinas explicitly endorses a mixed regime in the *Summa Theologica* at I.II.105 and at I.II.95.)

exceedingly rare; true kingship may be the best form of government, but practically speaking almost all “kings”, to a greater and lesser degree, rule in the manner of tyrants.⁶

Rewarding Virtuous Kings

The implicit argument that almost all “kings” rule in the manner of tyrants is reinforced by chapter eight. Having shown that “it is the king’s task to seek the good of the community,” Aquinas insists on the importance of considering “what a suitable reward for a good king might be” (21). Such an investigation should be undertaken, he argues, because “the king’s duty would seem unduly onerous if some good personal to himself were not provided in return” (21). But this point raises a new issue. What is it about kingship that makes it “unduly onerous”? Does not the activity of procuring the common good bring pleasure to the practitioner? Is not virtue its own reward?

If the king needs a reward apart from the proper and prudential fulfillment of his position, it would seem that the king of chapter eight is not virtuous. He does not work toward the common good for the sake of the common good or nobility, but rather for the sake of a reward. And if a reward is not presented, the practice of such work can only be buttressed by an onerous sense of duty. Once again, virtuous (or true) kingship is shown to be nearly non-existent. It is fitting, then, that the question of the reward of the king is preceded by a chapter devoted to the possibility of regicide in which Aquinas ratifies the deposing and killing of a tyrannical king. Aquinas’ discussion of reward, therefore, is the proverbial carrot that follows the stick. His political teaching revolves around the reality that nearly all men rule with a view to increasing their power.

The reward first suggested in chapter eight is the reward of honour and glory. This reward, notes Aquinas, is endorsed by Cicero and Aristotle, with the former arguing that the “ruler of the city should be flattered with glory”, and the latter asserting that, “the desire to seek their own good is present in the souls of all men. If, therefore, the prince were not content with honour and glory, he would seek pleasure and riches, and so would fall to plundering and injuring his subjects” (22). The tradition of political philosophy, like Aquinas, recognizes tyranny as a danger coeval with political life. In response, they attempt to circumvent the danger of tyranny by arguing for rewarding the good deeds of rulers with as much honour and glory as possible; they hope to steer the ruler away from the private pleasures of the body that defines the life of tyranny and toward the public pleasures associated with honour and glory. Aquinas, however, is not wholly satisfied with this project; he believes that this reward will not be enough to restrain a ruler from becoming a tyrant. Honour and glory will not prevent the possibility of tyranny because “there is nothing in human affairs more fragile” than these rewards, for they “depend upon human opinion, and there is nothing more changeable in the life of mankind” (22). Indeed, Aquinas suggests that the reward of honour and glory actually creates more dangers than it prevents. This reward, he argues, tends to create a desire for glory that leads men to seek “immoderate glory in the commerce of war”, and to fall into the vices of hypocrisy and dissimulation, for, “desiring glory, many pretend to be virtuous” (23).

⁶ The assertion that Aquinas holds nearly all kings to be tyrants does not mean that he believes that these kings rule with unmoderated tyranny. Indeed, although he believes that nearly all kings are not kings in the strict sense (and so are tyrants), he believes that these corrupted forms of kingship may nevertheless rule in a way that is reminiscent of true kingship. This teaching is made explicit when he notes that “Aristotle, in his *Politics*, having listed a number of tyrants, shows that the dominion of all of them came to an end in a short time and that, if some of them did reign for longer than others, this was because they did not carry their tyranny to extremes but in many respects imitated the moderation of kingship. “(33)

Aquinas goes even further. Not only can the desire for glory lead to tyranny, it also takes away from the greatness of soul, for “it destroys the liberty of spirit which ought above all to be the goal of the great-souled man, and nothing is more fitting to a prince who is appointed to accomplish good purposes than greatness of soul” (22). In other words, the suggested reward of ancient political philosophy not only fails to sufficiently prevent tyranny, it also threatens to destroy good government as practiced by the great-souled (or magnanimous) man. Yet here we are led into confusion, for Aquinas’ complaint seems to ignore the reality that the magnanimous man is distinguishable by his desire for honour. As Aristotle puts it,

Someone who is a great-souled, then, is especially concerned with honours and acts of dishonour; such a person will be moderately pleased at honours that are great and come from serious people . . . he takes it to be the greatest thing, for power and wealth are chosen on account of honour (1124a8-9, 17-18).

According to Aristotle, the desire for honor justified, for it is the proper reward of virtue: “what is great in each virtue would seem to belong to someone who is great-souled...honour is the prize for virtue and is allotted to those who are good. (1123b31). In other words, it is appropriate for the magnanimous man to desire honour because they desire it in relation to their worthiness; they desire what is due to them (1123b22). For Aristotle, therefore, honour is properly understood as a reward that belongs to virtue as a matter related to justice. The virtue of the great-souled man cannot be destroyed by his concern for honour because his concern for honour is governed by his belief that true honour must be grounded in the recognition of virtue.

At first glance, therefore, Aquinas’ position does not appear to be in full agreement with that of Aristotle, for his argument that glory will corrupt these great-souled men indicates that these men will actually be more concerned with the opinions of others than they are with virtue. Yet in the *Summa Theologica* it seems that Aquinas *is* in agreement with Aristotle’s account of magnanimity, for there he writes that, “we must conclude that the proper matter of magnanimity is great honour, and that a magnanimous man tends to such things as are deserving of honour”.⁷

The reason for this discrepancy can only be discovered by returning to Aristotle’s own account, which indicates that Aristotle is not completely satisfied with the magnanimous man. Aristotle’s conclusion that what is due to the magnanimous man is honour, implicitly points to the difficulty of the magnanimous man actually receiving what is his due. The magnanimous man, he writes,

Will be moderately pleased at honours that are great and come from serious people, taking them as hitting the mark of what is due, or even less than is due, *since there could be no honour worth of complete virtue*, though he will accept them nonetheless, since they have nothing greater to offer him” (1124a5-10).⁸

Because Aristotle’s great-souled man cares about the quality of those men doing the honouring, “he will have utter disdain for honour that comes from random people or is for minor matters, since it is not these of which he is worthy” (1123b12). In other words, since the dignity of honour depends as much on the man doing the honouring as the man receiving it, the magnanimous man cannot be honoured in the proper fashion, for none are as great as he. Thus, the life of the magnanimous man cannot be wholly satisfying, for he both lives in the knowledge that he deserves the highest of honours and views all the honours that he is given with contempt.

Aristotle’s discussion of the magnanimous man appears to lead to the conclusion that the morally virtuous life, in and of itself, is incomplete. Even if the magnanimous man acts virtuously solely for the sake of virtue, he cannot or should not be satisfied with the reality that

⁷ *Summa Theologica*. Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), (II.II.129.2). All references to this translation.

⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Joe Sachs. (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2002.) All references are to this translation.

the honour he receives from men is not in proper relation to his virtue: a lack of concern for this inadequacy would be a lack of concern for what is rightfully his – it would be a lack of concern for justice.⁹

Although Aristotle indicates a deficiency in the ability of honour to fulfill the proper reward of the magnanimous man, this deficiency does not necessarily point to the corruption of the magnanimous man. Although honour may be the greatest of external goods, the magnanimous man cares little for external goods (1124a17). In the same vein, Aquinas teaches that the magnanimous man “does not seek honour and glory as something great, as if they were a sufficient reward for virtue” (24). Thus, although the magnanimous man is conscious of the fact that he is not able to be properly honoured, this reality does not threaten to inhibit his pursuit of virtue, for the good of virtue is far more important to him than the external good of honour.

Yet this apparent solution ignores Aquinas’ claim that the reward of glory threatens to corrupt the magnanimous man. The problem caused by this claim can only finally be resolved when one notes that it is made within the context of Aquinas’ realist approach to kingship, which, as we have shown, teaches that nearly all kings rule in the manner of tyrants. Properly understood within its context then, the discussion of the magnanimous man serves to remind the reader that such a man will likely *not* be ruler. To approach politics with the presumption that a magnanimous man will rule is only increase the possibility of tyranny. Aquinas’ approach to kingship is inseparable from his concern for the problem that tyranny poses for political life: “given that so few achieve true virtue, therefore, it would seem more tolerable to choose as a ruler one who is at least restrained from overt wrongdoing by his fear of the judgment of men” (23). Since true kingship and false kingship (and true magnanimity and false magnanimity) can be almost impossible to distinguish – and since the latter is more likely than the former – prudence demands that we plan for the latter.

Aquinas, then, in opposition to the tradition of ancient political philosophy, appears to orient politics in a way that effectively lowers its sights. Politics should not be concerned with developing the best kind of government, it should be concerned with preventing the worst. Put another way, although Aquinas believes that kingship is the best form of government, he thinks that it is highly unlikely, if not impossible, for any man to rule as a king *in the true sense*; almost every kingly rule is really an extreme or moderate version of tyranny. Therefore, by restricting the definition of kingship to an almost unreachable standard, Aquinas is able to preserve the argument that kingship is the form of government least likely to fall into tyranny and that, even if

⁹ Aristotle, in an attempt to solve these problems, introduces the possibility of friendship. The magnanimous man, he writes, “is not capable of leading his life to suit anyone else, other than a friend.” (1124b31) Only a friend who possesses virtue equal to the magnanimous man – only a second magnanimous man – can provide the honour that is fitting for the magnanimous man to receive. Aristotle’s account of friendship, however, seems to not leave room for an account of the magnanimous man, for friendship, as it is described in Book IX of the *Ethics*, appears to replace the concern for honour with the concern for one’s friend. In other words, if the magnanimous man were to hold friendship as the greatest external good (as it is described in Book IX [1169b9]), then he would no longer hold honour as the greatest of external goods. (1123b18) And if he no longer held honour as the greatest of external goods, he could no longer fulfill the definition of the magnanimous man.

Although space does not allow room for a *complete* review of Aquinas’ account of friendship in *De Regno*, I will nevertheless implicitly show that his reformulation of politics allows for the compatibility of magnanimity and friendship. This compatibility is possible because Aquinas manages to remove the line separating the life of philosophy from the life of politics. This removal of this line allows for the compatibility of friendship and magnanimity because the friendship that was previously understood by Aristotle as ultimately defined by the shared pursuit of truth is reformulated to be centered around the common activity that is the pursuit of the common good (an activity that, not coincidentally, ends in a blessedness that contains the truth.)

it did, the tyranny would be less extreme than that arising from other forms of government. Only a true king would rule in a fashion conducive to peaceful unity and the common good, and such a king would rarely fall into tyranny. Aquinas' argument, therefore, provides an account of politics dependent on a low view of man's nature, while at the same time preserving the ancient tradition's more idealistic presentation.

The Theocratic Solution

Aquinas' attempt to simultaneously preserve the ideal while recommending a lower foundation for politics, depends on a turn to the Christian god. In response to the problem of magnanimity as presented by Aristotle, Aquinas uses theology to provide a unique avenue of escape. On the question of "Whether Magnanimity is about Honours?", he replies: "accordingly magnanimity is about honours in the sense that a man strives to do what is deserving of honour, yet not so as to think much of the honour accorded by *man*." (II.II.129.1) In other words, Aquinas leaves open the possibility that the magnanimous man will be honoured by God.¹⁰ The reward offered by the tradition of ancient political philosophy is replaced with the eternal reward that is given by God:

It can, therefore, truly be said that honour and glory are the rewards of a king: for what worldly and passing honour can resemble that honour by which a man becomes a citizen (of the kingdom of God) and a member of God's household, and through which he is numbered among the children of God and attain with Christ to the inheritance of a heavenly kingdom (27).

The magnanimous man – the ideal ruler – is now able to receive his proper reward because he will be honoured by one who is greater than he. This honour ultimately takes the form of "blessedness", which is "the perfect good, . . . the reward of virtue," and the "ultimate end of desire" (25-26).

Aquinas' political project, therefore, is centered on the ideal of a Christian king who is a great-souled man and therefore possesses all the virtues necessary for the reward of blessedness. Yet this ideal remains incredibly difficult to obtain. In fact, Aquinas raises the possibility that the only one who fulfills such a description is Christ. To follow this argument, however, requires reading Aquinas' use of scripture in way that is different than its apparent meaning. For example, interpreting Ezekiel 37:24, Aquinas writes:

'And David my servant shall be king over them, and they all shall have one shepherd.' It is clearly shown by this verse that it is the nature of kingship that there should be one who rules, and that he should be a shepherd who seeks the common good and not his own gain (9).

Although this verse appears to be endorsing kingship through an appeal to the rule of King David, a moment's reflection reminds us that by the time of Ezekiel, David has come and gone – the David that is spoken of can be none other than Christ.

Likewise, Aquinas uses Isaiah 40:6 ("glory is like the flowers...and the flowers fall"), to apparently disprove glory and honour as the proper reward of the king (22). Yet when the verse is considered within the context of the whole biblical chapter, one discovers that it does endorse both the glory and rewards when they are provided by God (vs. 5, 10). One also discovers that the chapter's detailed account of God's kingship confirms our interpretation of *De Regno* as a

¹⁰ In reference to the preceding discussion, it is important to note the possible objection that might stem from the fact that Aquinas drops the word "honour" (leaving only "glory") when he turns his critique of the proper reward toward magnanimity (Aristotle's account only uses the word "honour" in its discussion.) In response, we should note that this in no way affects our argument about Aristotle's account of the magnanimous man. Moreover, we would argue that this dropping of the word "honour" is meant to point out that the "honour" given the magnanimous man in Aristotle's account cannot be true honour – it can only be glory. (It can only be glory because those giving the "honour" cannot understand what they are honouring, for they have no true knowledge of what magnanimity is.)

whole – verses 22-27 destroy the possibility of calling any earthly ruler a king in the true sense of the word. As Aquinas will later make explicit:

Because the enjoyment of Divinity is an end which a man cannot attain through human virtue alone, but only through Divine virtue, according to the Apostle at Romans 6:23: ‘The grace of God is eternal life’, it is not human but Divine rule that will lead us to this end. And government of this kind belongs only to that King who is not only man, but also God: that is, to our lord Jesus Christ, Who by making men sons of God, has led them to the glory of heaven.” (41)

Of course, while the heavenly king spoken of may indeed be the Christ, Christ does not simply rule; he rules through his Church on earth:

The administration of this kingdom, therefore, is entrusted not to earthly kings, but to priests, so that spiritual and earthly things may be kept distinct; and in particular to the Supreme Priest, the successor of Peter, the Vicar of Christ, the Roman Pontiff, to whom all the kings of the Christian people should be subject, as if to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. (40)

De Regno is concerned not only the ruler of an earthly city, but also the ruler of the kingdom of heaven as it exists on earth. In so far as he is Christ’s Vicar only the Pope can rule in accordance with the definition of the true king – all other kings represent forms of tyranny. But this is not to say that earthly kingship is not redeemable as an institution. Rather, Aquinas is suggesting that in order to be redeemed – in order to rule as a king in the truest sense possible – an earthly king must submit to the authority of the Church, for:

If...he who is responsible for a final end must govern those who are responsible for the things directed towards that end and must direct them by his command, it is clear that the king, just as he must be subject to the lordship and governance administered by the priestly office, must rule over all human occupations and direct them by his own command and rule (42-43).

Kingship in the true sense, therefore, can only be achieved on earth by the king’s submission to the Church who in turn is in submission to the only true king – Christ. As Aquinas puts it, “the final perfection and complete good of anything depends upon something superior to itself” (26).

To summarize: according to *De Regno*’s political teaching, kingship is the best form of government because it is the least corruptible and because it allows for the unity required to the proper pursuit of the common good. Rulers in themselves, however, lack the capacity to rule in a way that fulfills the true definition of the king. They rule according to their earthly desires, a failure that stems from a dependence on man rather than God. Thus, because men lack the ability to rule in complete accordance with common good, they must submit their rule to the Church, who will direct them in a way befitting true kingship. We may therefore conclude that Aquinas’ remarks regarding the possible corruption of a magnanimous ruler are in fact directed toward the Church rather than the earthly king. A priest or Pope that replaces his care for the glory of God with the glory of men threatens to destroy the freedom from men’s opinions that allow him to properly direct those in his care toward the common good.¹¹ *De Regno* concerns the Church at least as much as it concerns the King of Cyprus.

As I have noted, however, Aquinas is not simply concerned with the ideal. He is well aware of the dangers of tyranny and the fact that, in their pursuit of pleasure, most earthly kings will be unwilling to submit to a heavenly authority. In an attempt, at best, to convert the king and, at worst, to mitigate his vices, he turns to fear.¹² Not only does he make it clear that the killing of a tyrant is fully justified when it is for the sake of the common good, he also emphasizes the divine and eternal punishments that will befall one who acts against the common good. The tyrant will be “deprived of the most excellent blessedness”, and will acquire “the

¹¹ In the final analysis, therefore, Aquinas believes that even the magnanimous man can be corrupted by sin (perhaps his repeated use of Solomon is not a coincidence.)

¹² As we have noted, Aquinas implies that if conversion does not occur, the proper response is a mixed regime.

greatest degree of torment” (35). Moreover, “no matter how much they may desire it, tyrants cannot secure the good of friendship” (31), for the tyrant must preserve himself through fear rather than through love, and “fear is a weak foundation” (32-33).¹³

Aquinas, therefore, attempts to lay the groundwork for the best form of government. This effort represents a break with traditional political philosophy because Aquinas is both more realistic and more idealistic than this tradition. Unlike this tradition, Aquinas rejects the possibility that the human rewards of honour and glory can sufficiently prevent tyranny. Unlike the moderns, however, who, when faced with this reality, simply lowered the sights of politics by founding a politics that accounted for the continuous presence of tyrannical impulses (and therefore in many ways encouraged them, Aquinas attempts to create a kingship whose tyrannical impulses are checked by the Church.

Thus, although Aristotle believed that an account of virtuous government founded on the reward of honour represented the best *political teaching*, he questioned the adequacy of that teaching as a *philosophic argument*. Aquinas, however, by showing that the magnanimous man can rule *and* receive his proper reward by reference to the true King, presents an account that solves the difficulty implicitly pointed to by the ancients.¹⁴ In other words, although Aquinas continues in the tradition of the ancients by promoting a political philosophy that aims at the best form of government, he at the same time challenges this tradition by disputing the limits it puts on the practice of politics. It is a dispute that questions not only the political solution of the ancients, but also their claim that philosophy is the best way of life for man.

Theology and the Philosopher-King

To show that Aquinas intends to question the life of philosophy, it is necessary to return to the beginning of *De Regno*, where he claims that he will show kingship in its highest form. To fulfill this calling, he will “draw out the origin of a kingdom and what pertains to the king’s office, according to the authority of Divine scripture” *and* “the teachings of the philosophers” (5). In other words, Aquinas claims that he will go further than joining together Aristotle’s philosophy with theology; he will join philosophy with the Bible.¹⁵ Chapter one begins with Aquinas stating that in order to fulfill this aim, “we must begin by explaining how the title ‘king’ is to be understood” (5). This understanding begins with Aquinas noting that man both has an end that it is natural for him to work towards and that he “needs something to guide him towards his end” (5). Of course, the former proposition does not necessarily lead to the latter, in the sense that man may be able to direct himself to that end. Aquinas, therefore, must show that “one man cannot live a self-sufficient life” (6). To do so, he offers this account:

Now each man is imbued by nature with the light of reason, and he is directed towards his end by its action within him. If it were proper for man to live in solitude, as many animals do, he would need no other guide towards his end; for each man would then be a king unto himself, under God, the supreme King, and would direct his own actions by the light of reason divinely given to him (5).

¹³ Aquinas’ use of fear in order to dissuade the tyrant’s use of fear points to the difference between true kingship and the tyrannical rule. The true king knows that fear allows for the sake of the love and wisdom that is the gift of God, because it is the recognition of our dependence on him. Conversely, the tyrant must use fear in attempt to gain love, an attempt that debases him in a way that make him unworthy of love.

¹⁴ His account allows for an understanding of magnanimity that does not require a movement toward friendship (although it allows and encourages it – see footnote 9.)

¹⁵ The latter project depends on the former; Aristotle allows for the proper understanding of philosophy, just as theology allows for the proper understanding of the Bible.

Here, Aquinas offers the basis for the acceptance of Aristotle's claim that "man is by nature a social and political animal" (5-6).¹⁶ To not live in accordance with this claim is to "live in solitude, as many animals do" (5). For Aristotle, an alternative to living according to a political nature is to live as either as a beast or a god.¹⁷ Aquinas points in the direction of the latter, for he describes the man as one who is "a king unto himself" and who directs "his own actions by the light of reason" (5). Aquinas can only be referring to the claim of Platonic political philosophy that the life of a philosopher is complete and self-sufficient.¹⁸

Yet Aquinas is not simply abandoning the way of philosophy, for, as he notes, "man is imbued by nature with the light of reason, and he is directed towards his end by its actions within him" (5). We are reminded that "wherever things are organized into a unity, something is found that rules all the rest" (7). This ruling principle is defined in terms of reason:

For by a certain order of Divine providence all bodies in the material universe are ruled by the primary, that is the celestial, body, and all bodies by rational creatures. Also, in one man the soul rules the body, and, within the soul, the irascible and concupiscible appetites are ruled by reason. Again, among the members of the body there is one ruling part, either the heart or the head which moves all others. It is fitting, therefore, that in every multitude there should be some ruling principle (7-8).

For the philosopher, that ruling principle is human reason. For Aquinas, as for Plato, the relation of reason to the appetites is the same as the relation of the ruler to his subjects. In other words, following the *Republic*, *De Regno* claims that because the soul is representative of politics, kingship as the best form of government is proved by reference to the correct ordering of the soul (it is noteworthy that a fitting name for Plato's *Republic* would be *On Kingship*). Aquinas' equation of the soul with politics appears to accept Plato's claim that the best (and most just) regime is ruled by philosophers. This agreement is discarded, however, when Aquinas rejects the possibility of philosophic self-sufficiency: "it is not possible for one man to apprehend all such things by reason. It is therefore necessary for man to live in community" (6).¹⁹

In other words, man's self-sufficiency is constrained by the nature of man's reason – even the reason of the philosopher is deficient. Thus, just as the tradition of ancient philosophy cannot give a sound account of the political life because it is unable to properly account for the reward of the magnanimous man, it cannot give a sound account of philosophy because it cannot account for the proper reward of the philosopher. Like the magnanimous man who cannot achieve the honour befitting his efforts, the philosopher cannot achieve what is due to him – he cannot achieve the whole truth. In order to receive his true reward, the philosopher must become a theologian.

The teaching of *De Regno*, therefore, depends upon the relationship between God and politics and the implication of that relationship for philosophy. In arguing that kingship is the best form of rule and that the true king is Christ, Aquinas attempts to show that the true earthly

¹⁶ *Politics*, 1253a3.

¹⁷ *Politics*, 1253a27.

¹⁸ See *Theaetetus* 75e; Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3-6. Aristotle's magnanimous man also attempts to live a self-sufficient life.

¹⁹ While the Platonic accounts of self-sufficiency in the *Theaetetus* and *Republic* are finally ironic, they evidently were not understood that way by Aquinas. In the *Summa*, Aquinas critiques Socrates for his attempt at self-sufficiency: "Accordingly some held that all the active principles in man are subordinate to reason in this way. If this were true, for man to act well it would suffice that his reason be perfect. Consequently, since virtue is a habit perfecting man in view of his doing good actions, it would follow that it is only in the reason, so that there would be none but intellectual virtues. This was the opinion of Socrates, who said "every virtue is a kind of prudence," as stated in *Ethic.* vi, 13. Hence he maintained that as long as man is in possession of knowledge, he cannot sin; and that every one who sins, does so through ignorance. Now this is based on a false supposition" (I.II.58.2).

king is ruled by the heavenly King. This rule, however, occurs by way of the Church; Christ rules the king through the Church. The Church, however, in being ruled by Christ is also ruled by its understanding of Christ – it is ruled by theology. And, as indicated by the deeds of Aquinas (who gives advice in the manner described in *De Regno* by way of his writing of *De Regno*), since the Church is ruled by theology, it is also ruled by the theologian. In other words, Aquinas transforms the teaching of the philosopher-king into the teaching of the theologian-king. And, following Plato (who equates politics and the soul), Aquinas indicates that the soul is properly ruled by Christ.²⁰

Conclusion

To repeat, following the pattern laid out by Plato, Aquinas argues that reason informed by faith should rule the soul and that, politically, this equates to having a ruler who will listen to theology.²¹ In making this argument, Aquinas not only presents an alternative to the political philosophy offered by the ancients, he suggests an alternative way of life to the philosopher. Put another way, his account of politics attempts to prove that reason governed by faith is more reasonable than the reason adhered to by the tradition of ancient political philosophy.

As proof of the superiority of this divinely aided reason, Aquinas points to the problem of the proper reward of the king, implicitly noting that political philosophy has been unable to give a good account of the proper reward of the king. Moreover, by making reference to Plato's claim that politics is equitable to the soul, Aquinas also points out that even the man with the correctly ordered soul (i.e. the philosopher) cannot be properly rewarded for their reason – the philosopher, like the king, must pursue what he can never obtain. This problem, Aquinas argues, is solved by reference to God. The king receives his suitable reward from God, for blessedness is an honour that far exceeds what is deserved. For the philosopher-turned-theologian the fitting reward is also blessedness, because true blessedness contains the truth. Thus, by providing a critique of ancient political philosophy's idealism, Aquinas attempts to refound politics upon what he sees as the true idealism – an idealism that rests in the majesty and goodness of God. It is a refounding that elevates politics in a way that attempts to allow for the fulfillment of the life of politics and the life of philosophy, without ignoring the dangers posed to these aims by tyranny.

²⁰ Insofar as this portion of our analysis depends on a reading that occurs “between the lines”, it may be classified as “esoteric”. But why would Aquinas write esoterically? One response is that he must balance his true aim for government with the immediate aim of influencing the King of Cyprus who, as a tyrant, would not want to fully give up his hold on power: Aquinas' concern for prudence over idealism remains a constant. A second response is that his since his aim is to bring theology into conversation with philosophy, he turns to the art of writing that belongs to philosophy. Whether this entails “true” esotericism would require a long discussion of the nature of the art of esotericism.

²¹ The implication of the philosopher king is that because he can never rule, the next best option is to have a ruler who will listen to the philosopher. This teaching is carried out in Aristotle's account of the virtuous man – the man who is most likely to listen to the philosopher.