

Government: Good or Bad? Big or Little?

Reframing the Debate

by Thomas Storck

Toward the beginning of *De Caelo* (*On the Heavens*), Aristotle makes the well-known remark that “the least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousandfold”—or, as it is sometimes phrased, “a small error in the beginning leads to a large error later on.” We can easily see that this is true, whether in immediately practical operations or, more importantly, in intellectual investigations. If our first principles are not right, how can the rest of our reasoning be correct? This is true concerning our thinking about government. Is government a necessary evil? A necessary good? Is that government best which governs least? In thinking about these questions, it is good not only to begin at the beginning but to begin with the right questions and their correct answers.

If government were a necessary evil, one reason for this might be that it was something that would not exist had man not sinned. Christians believe that God originally created one man and one woman whose nature was untouched by evil and who were given special gifts to perfect that nature, but who were then tempted by the Devil and sinned. Because of Original Sin, all their descendants lost those extraordinary gifts, although man’s basic nature remains good, albeit wounded. Had Adam and Eve never sinned, and had they begotten children in the state of innocence, would there have been a need for government? To some, this may seem like a useless question, as removed from reality as to ask what lunar landings would be like if the moon were made of green cheese. However, this question reveals something about the place of government among men. If we answer it the wrong way, we will commit the small error at the beginning of our inquiry which leads to a big error later on.

Thomas Aquinas proposes to himself this very question. In his *Summa Theologica* (I:96:4), he asks whether there would be subordination of man to man in the state of innocence. Yes, he answers very clearly. Although there would not have been the domination characteristic of the slave (*servus*), who is “ordered to another,” there would still have been the kind of subjection proper to the free man, when someone directs him to his own good or to the common good. And the reasons given by Saint Thomas for this are two: First, because man is “naturally a social animal,” and “social life cannot exist unless someone presides who aims at the common good”; and second, because it would be unfitting for someone to have “supereminence in knowledge or justice” unless he could use this supereminence for the good of others. In other words, according to Saint Thomas, had Original Sin never entered the world, we would still have had a sort of government, one that did not need to punish anyone but was still there to co-

ordinate and direct our common projects toward the public good. Adam and Eve, after all, were not omniscient. If our hypothetical unfallen brothers had wanted to build a road or a dam or a bridge, they would still have needed to put it in this place rather than that, and someone would have had to make the final decision as to where.

By his answer, Saint Thomas was already guarding us against many wrong conclusions that we might reach. One of them is the notion that government is a necessary evil. Government, on the contrary, is a necessary good and has a natural role to play in man’s affairs; as we consider the question of the proper size and activity of government, we must keep this truth in mind.

If government is a necessary good, the question of the size and responsibility of government should be approached in the spirit, not of trying to see how small we can make it, nor how large, but of calmly looking at those tasks that man can accomplish only or best *via* government, and setting government’s proper bounds in response to man’s nature and needs. It would be amusing if those who tell us that that government is best which governs least, having placed an emergency call to the police, got a recording that simply said: “The police department has been abolished, because that government governs best which governs least.” On the other hand, we find that those who call themselves liberals seem to belong to the One Problem/One Agency school. If there is a social problem of any sort, then there obviously is a need for a government agency to solve it, or at least to try to solve it. Both the “biggest is best” and the “smallest is best” philosophies are wrong, however.

If there is some social need that we do not think appropriate for direct governmental action, what alternatives do we have? Often, in the Anglo-American political tradition, we are presented with only three alternatives: direct government control, private charity, or some kind of market-based approach. This is by no means an adequate enumeration of all possible approaches, for we must consider the principle of subsidiarity, first enunciated by Pope Pius XI in his 1931 encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*. Subsidiarity holds that

it is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable, that one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry. So, too, it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order, to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies. Inasmuch as every social activity should, by its very nature, prove a help to members of the body social,

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it should never destroy or absorb them.

Now, this principle is often misunderstood and misapplied. Some seem to think, for example, that it is calling for matters to be committed as often as possible to for-profit groups or private charity. The “lesser and subordinate bodies” that the Pope speaks of, however, are not necessarily purely private, let alone for-profit. Nor are they necessarily devoid of real authority. Since, later on in this same encyclical, Pope Pius strongly urges the reestablishment of something like the medieval guilds, we can assume that he is not opposed to the assumption of real authority for the common good by some of these “lesser and subordinate bodies.”

In the political traditions common in English-speaking countries, this sort of arrangement would probably be called *delegation* of governmental authority to nongovernmental bodies. Sometimes it is dismissed as “corporatism.” But just because we have not had much recent experience with such arrangements is no reason that we should not consider them. The notion of an either/or—that a matter either belongs to the state authorities or is entirely private—often hampers us from pursuing sensible solutions. Moreover, one steeped in a political philosophy closer to Aristotle and Aquinas might argue that this is not a question of *delegation* of authority at all. Rather, certain forms of authority necessary for the common good naturally lodge themselves at different levels of the social body, and, without taking away from the supreme authority its necessary task of coordinating the pursuit of the common good, certain lower bodies are *ipso facto* the proper places for some necessary functions to be placed. They do not derive their powers from the central government; they derive their powers from the nature of the body politic, subject only to the state authorities preventing abuses. Just as the authority of the father of a family does not come from the state, yet parents obviously fulfill an important function that has numerous public consequences, so it might well be with other entities.

Today, we are faced with an often bitter battle over the nature of government’s role in society. Rarely is the question debated in the abstract; instead, each separate issue—healthcare, minimum wages, workplace protection—is approached separately. Generally, those who call themselves the left or the right approach these issues from their own set of assumptions, often not clearly understood or articulated. If we could begin to go beyond this usually silly impasse—first, by asking fundamental questions in the abstract about government’s role; then, by positing other kinds of entities that might be created or formalized to address our manifold problems—we might be able to make some progress beyond our current mess. At least we might have a more interesting discussion than the one we have now. ◊