Aristotle
Nicomachean Ethics

Book I

1

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities. Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends also are many; the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth. But where such arts fall under a single capacity— as bridle-making and the other arts concerned with the equipment of horses fall under the art of riding, and this and every military action under strategy, in the same way other arts fall under yet others— in all of these the ends of the master arts are to be preferred to all the subordinate ends; for it is for the sake of the former that the latter are pursued. It makes no difference whether the activities themselves are the ends of the actions, or something else apart from the activities, as in the case of the sciences just mentioned.

2

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object. It would seem to belong to the most authoritative art and that which is most truly the master art. And politics appears to be of this nature; for it is this that ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them; and we see even the most highly esteemed of capacities to fall under this, e.g. strategy, economics, rhetoric; now, since politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man. For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete whether to attain or to preserve; though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states. These, then, are the ends at which our inquiry aims, since it is political science, in one sense of that term.

3

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts. Now fine and just actions, which political science investigates, admit of much variety and fluctuation of opinion,
so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature. And goods also give rise to a similar fluctuation because they bring harm to many people; for before now men have been undone by reason of their wealth, and others by reason of their courage. We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.

Now each man judges well the things he knows, and of these he is a good judge. And so the man who has been educated in a subject is a good judge of that subject, and the man who has received an all-round education is a good judge in general. Hence a young man is not a proper hearer of lectures on political science; for he is inexperienced in the actions that occur in life, but its discussions start from these and are about these; and, further, since he tends to follow his passions, his study will be vain and unprofitable, because the end aimed at is not knowledge but action. And it makes no difference whether he is young in years or youthful in character; the defect does not depend on time, but on his living, and pursuing each successive object, as passion directs. For to such persons, as to the incontinent, knowledge brings no profit; but to those who desire and act in accordance with a rational principle knowledge about such matters will be of great benefit.

These remarks about the student, the sort of treatment to be expected, and the purpose of the inquiry, may be taken as our preface.

4

Let us resume our inquiry and state, in view of the fact that all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, what it is that we say political science aims at and what is the highest of all goods achievable by action. Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honor; they differ, however, from one another— and often even the same man identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor; but, conscious of their ignorance, they admire those who proclaim some great ideal that is above their comprehension. Now some thought that apart from these many goods there is another which is self-subsistent and causes the goodness of all these as well. To examine all the opinions that have been held were perhaps somewhat fruitless; enough to examine those that are most prevalent or that seem to be arguable.

Let us not fail to notice, however, that there is a difference between arguments from and those to the first principles. For Plato, too, was right in raising this question and asking, as he used to do, 'are we on the way from or to the first principles?' There is a difference, as there is in a race-course between the course from the judges to the turning-point and the way back.
For, while we must begin with what is known, things are objects of knowledge in two senses- some to us, some without qualification. Presumably, then, we must begin with things known to us. Hence any one who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just, and generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits. For the fact is the starting-point, and if this is sufficiently plain to him, he will not at the start need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get starting points. And as for him who neither has nor can get them, let him hear the words of Hesiod:

Far best is he who knows all things himself;  
Good, he that hearkens when men counsel right;  
But he who neither knows, nor lays to heart  
Another's wisdom, is a useless wight.

5

Let us, however, resume our discussion from the point at which we digressed. To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without some ground) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment. For there are, we may say, three prominent types of life- that just mentioned, the political, and thirdly the contemplative life. Now the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts, but they get some ground for their view from the fact that many of those in high places share the tastes of Sardanapallus. A consideration of the prominent types of life shows that people of superior refinement and of active disposition identify happiness with honor; for this is, roughly speaking, the end of the political life. But it seems too superficial to be what we are looking for, since it is thought to depend on those who bestow honor rather than on him who receives it, but the good we divine to be something proper to a man and not easily taken from him. Further, men seem to pursue honor in order that they may be assured of their goodness; at least it is by men of practical wisdom that they seek to be honored, and among those who know them, and on the ground of their virtue; clearly, then, according to them, at any rate, virtue is better. And perhaps one might even suppose this to be, rather than honor, the end of the political life. But even this appears somewhat incomplete; for possession of virtue seems actually compatible with being asleep, or with lifelong inactivity, and, further, with the greatest sufferings and misfortunes; but a man who was living so no one would call happy, unless he were maintaining a thesis at all costs. But enough of this; for the subject has been sufficiently treated even in the current discussions. Third comes the contemplative life, which we shall consider later.

The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else. And so one might rather take the aforesaid objects to be ends; for they are loved for themselves. But it is evident that not even these are ends; yet many arguments have been thrown away in support of them. Let us leave this subject, then.

6

We had perhaps better consider the universal good and discuss thoroughly what is meant by it, although such an inquiry is made an uphill one by the fact that the Forms have been introduced by friends of our own. Yet it would perhaps be
thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers or lovers of wisdom; for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honor truth above our friends.

The men who introduced this doctrine did not posit Ideas of classes within which they recognized priority and posteriority (which is the reason why they did not maintain the existence of an Idea embracing all numbers); but the term 'good' is used both in the category of substance and in that of quality and in that of relation, and that which is per se, i.e. substance, is prior in nature to the relative (for the latter is like an off shoot and accident of being); so that there could not be a common Idea set over all these goods. Further, since 'good' has as many senses as 'being' (for it is predicated both in the category of substance, as of God and of reason, and in quality, i.e. of the virtues, and in quantity, i.e. of that which is moderate, and in relation, i.e. of the useful, and in time, i.e. of the right opportunity, and in place, i.e. of the right locality and the like), clearly it cannot be something universally present in all cases and single; for then it could not have been predicated in all the categories but in one only. Further, since of the things answering to one Idea there is one science, there would have been one science of all the goods; but as it is there are many sciences even of the things that fall under one category, e.g. of opportunity, for opportunity in war is studied by strategics and in disease by medicine, and the moderate in food is studied by medicine and in exercise by the science of gymnastics. And one might ask the question, what in the world they mean by 'a thing itself', is (as is the case) in 'man himself' and in a particular man the account of man is one and the same. For in so far as they are man, they will in no respect differ; and if this is so, neither will 'good itself' and particular goods, in so far as they are good. But again it will not be good any the more for being eternal, since that which lasts long is no whiter than that which perishes in a day. The Pythagoreans seem to give a more plausible account of the good, when they place the one in the column of goods; and it is they that Speusippus seems to have followed.

But let us discuss these matters elsewhere; an objection to what we have said, however, may be discerned in the fact that the Platonists have not been speaking about all goods, and that the goods that are pursued and loved for themselves are called good by reference to a single Form, while those which tend to produce or to preserve these somehow or to prevent their contraries are called so by reference to these, and in a secondary sense. Clearly, then, goods must be spoken of in two ways, and some must be good in themselves, the others by reason of these. Let us separate, then, things good in themselves from things useful, and consider whether the former are called good by reference to a single Idea. What sort of goods would one call good in themselves? Is it those that are pursued even when isolated from others, such as intelligence, sight, and certain pleasures and honors? Certainly, if we pursue these also for the sake of something else, yet one would place them among things good in themselves. Or is nothing other than the Idea of good good in itself? In that case the Form will be empty. But if the things we have named are also things good in themselves, the account of the good will have to appear as something identical in them all, as that of whiteness is identical in snow and in white lead. But of honor, wisdom, and pleasure, just in respect of their goodness, the accounts are distinct and diverse. The good, therefore, is not some common element answering to one Idea.
But what then do we mean by the good? It is surely not like the things that only chance to have the same name. Are goods one, then, by being derived from one good or by all contributing to one good, or are they rather one by analogy? Certainly as sight is in the body, so is reason in the soul, and so on in other cases. But perhaps these subjects had better be dismissed for the present; for perfect precision about them would be more appropriate to another branch of philosophy. And similarly with regard to the Idea; even if there is some one good which is universally predicable of goods or is capable of separate and independent existence, clearly it could not be achieved or attained by man; but we are now seeking something attainable. Perhaps, however, some one might think it worth while to recognize this with a view to the goods that are attainable and achievable; for having this as a sort of pattern we shall know better the goods that are good for us, and if we know them shall attain them. This argument has some plausibility, but seems to clash with the procedure of the sciences; for all of these, though they aim at some good and seek to supply the deficiency of it, leave on one side the knowledge of the good. Yet that all the exponents of the arts should be ignorant of, and should not even seek, so great an aid is not probable. It is hard, too, to see how a weaver or a carpenter will be benefited in regard to his own craft by knowing this 'good itself', or how the man who has viewed the Idea itself will be a better doctor or general thereby. For a doctor seems not even to study health in this way, but the health of man, or perhaps rather the health of a particular man; it is individuals that he is healing. But enough of these topics.

Let us again return to the good we are seeking, and ask what it can be. It seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? Surely that for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine this is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, in any other sphere something else, and in every action and pursuit the end; for it is for the sake of this that all men do whatever else they do. Therefore, if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action.

So the argument has by a different course reached the same point; but we must try to state this even more clearly. Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (e.g. wealth, flutes, and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for self and never for the sake of
something else, but honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.

From the point of view of self-sufficiency the same result seems to follow; for the final good is thought to be self-sufficient. Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship. But some limit must be set to this; for if we extend our requirement to ancestors and descendants and friends' friends we are in for an infinite series. Let us examine this question, however, on another occasion; the self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, without being counted as one good thing among others- if it were so counted it would clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods; for that which is added becomes an excess of goods, and of goods the greater is always more desirable. Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.

Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he born without a function? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought. And, as 'life of the rational element' also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term. Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if we say 'so-and-so-and 'a good so-and-so' have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre, and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case, and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.
But we must add 'in a complete life.' For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.

Let this serve as an outline of the good; for we must presumably first sketch it roughly, and then later fill in the details. But it would seem that any one is capable of carrying on and articulating what has once been well outlined, and that time is a good discoverer or partner in such a work; to which facts the advances of the arts are due; for any one can add what is lacking. And we must also remember what has been said before, and not look for precision in all things alike, but in each class of things such precision as accords with the subject-matter, and so much as is appropriate to the inquiry. For a carpenter and a geometer investigate the right angle in different ways; the former does so in so far as the right angle is useful for his work, while the latter inquires what it is or what sort of thing it is; for he is a spectator of the truth. We must act in the same way, then, in all other matters as well, that our main task may not be subordinated to minor questions. Nor must we demand the cause in all matters alike; it is enough in some cases that the fact be well established, as in the case of the first principles; the fact is the primary thing or first principle. Now of first principles we see some by induction, some by perception, some by a certain habituation, and others too in other ways. But each set of principles we must try to investigate in the natural way, and we must take pains to state them definitely, since they have a great influence on what follows. For the beginning is thought to be more than half of the whole, and many of the questions we ask are cleared up by it.
Politics

Book Seven

1

He who would duly inquire about the best form of a state ought first to determine which is the most eligible life; while this remains uncertain the best form of the state must also be uncertain: for, in the natural order of things, those may be expected to lead the best life who are governed in the best manner of which their circumstances admit. We ought therefore to ascertain, first of all, which is the most generally eligible life, and then whether the same life is or is not best for the state and for individuals.

Assuming that enough has been already said in discussions outside the school concerning the best life, we will now only repeat what is contained in them. Certainly no one will dispute the propriety of that partition of goods which separates them into three classes, viz., external goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul, or deny that the happy man must have all three. For no one would maintain that he is happy who has not in him a particle of courage or temperance or justice or prudence, who is afraid of every insect which flutters past him, and will commit any crime, however great, in order to gratify his lust of meat or drink, who will sacrifice his dearest friend for the sake of half-a-farthing, and is as feeble and false in mind as a child or a madman. These propositions are almost universally acknowledged as soon as they are uttered, but men differ about the degree or relative superiority of this or that good. Some think that a very moderate amount of virtue is enough, but set no limit to their desires of wealth, property, power, reputation, and the like. To whom we reply by an appeal to facts, which easily prove that mankind do not acquire or preserve virtue by the help of external goods, but external goods by the help of virtue, and that happiness, whether consisting in pleasure or virtue, or both, is more often found with those who are most highly cultivated in their mind and in their character, and have only a moderate share of external goods, than among those who possess external goods to a useless extent but are deficient in higher qualities; and this is not only matter of experience, but, if reflected upon, will easily appear to be in accordance with reason. For, whereas external goods have a limit, like any other instrument, and all things useful are of such a nature that where there is too much of them they must either do harm, or at any rate be of no use, to their possessors, every good of the soul, the greater it is, is also of greater use, if the epithet useful as well as noble is appropriate to such subjects. No proof is required to show that the best state of one thing in relation to another corresponds in degree of excellence to the interval between the natures of which we say that these very states are states: so that, if the soul is more noble than our possessions or our bodies, both absolutely and in relation to us, it must be admitted that the best state of either has a similar ratio to the other. Again, it is for the sake of the soul that goods external and goods of the body are eligible at all, and all wise men ought to choose them for the sake of the soul, and not the soul for the sake of them.

Let us acknowledge then that each one has just so much of happiness as he has of virtue and wisdom, and of virtuous and wise action. God is a witness to us of this truth, for he is happy and blessed, not by reason of any external good, but in himself and by reason of his own nature. And herein of necessity lies the difference between good fortune and happiness; for
external goods come of themselves, and chance is the author of them, but no one is just or temperate by or through chance. In like manner, and by a similar train of argument, the happy state may be shown to be that which is best and which acts rightly; and rightly it cannot act without doing right actions, and neither individual nor state can do right actions without virtue and wisdom. Thus the courage, justice, and wisdom of a state have the same form and nature as the qualities which give the individual who possesses them the name of just, wise, or temperate.

Thus much may suffice by way of preface: for I could not avoid touching upon these questions, neither could I go through all the arguments affecting them; these are the business of another science.

Let us assume then that the best life, both for individuals and states, is the life of virtue, when virtue has external goods enough for the performance of good actions. If there are any who controvert our assertion, we will in this treatise pass them over, and consider their objections hereafter.

There remains to be discussed the question whether the happiness of the individual is the same as that of the state, or different. Here again there can be no doubt- no one denies that they are the same. For those who hold that the well-being of the individual consists in his wealth, also think that riches make the happiness of the whole state, and those who value most highly the life of a tyrant deem that city the happiest which rules over the greatest number; while they who approve an individual for his virtue say that the more virtuous a city is, the happier it is. Two points here present themselves for consideration: first (1), which is the more eligible life, that of a citizen who is a member of a state, or that of an alien who has no political ties; and again (2), which is the best form of constitution or the best condition of a state, either on the supposition that political privileges are desirable for all, or for a majority only? Since the good of the state and not of the individual is the proper subject of political thought and speculation, and we are engaged in a political discussion, while the first of these two points has a secondary interest for us, the latter will be the main subject of our inquiry.

Now it is evident that the form of government is best in which every man, whoever he is, can act best and live happily. But even those who agree in thinking that the life of virtue is the most eligible raise a question, whether the life of business and politics is or is not more eligible than one which is wholly independent of external goods, I mean than a contemplative life, which by some is maintained to be the only one worthy of a philosopher. For these two lives- the life of the philosopher and the life of the statesman- appear to have been preferred by those who have been most keen in the pursuit of virtue, both in our own and in other ages. Which is the better is a question of no small moment; for the wise man, like the wise state, will necessarily regulate his life according to the best end. There are some who think that while a despotic rule over others is the greatest injustice, to exercise a constitutional rule over them, even though not unjust, is a great impediment to a man's individual wellbeing. Others take an opposite view; they maintain that the true life of man is the practical and political, and that every virtue admits of being practiced, quite as much by statesmen and rulers as by private individuals. Others, again, are of opinion that arbitrary and tyrannical rule alone
consists with happiness; indeed, in some states the entire aim both of the laws and of the constitution is to give men despotic power over their neighbors. And, therefore, although in most cities the laws may be said generally to be in a chaotic state, still, if they aim at anything, they aim at the maintenance of power: thus in Lacedaemon and Crete the system of education and the greater part of the of the laws are framed with a view to war. And in all nations which are able to gratify their ambition military power is held in esteem, for example among the Scythians and Persians and Thracians and Celts.

In some nations there are even laws tending to stimulate the warlike virtues, as at Carthage, where we are told that men obtain the honor of wearing as many armlets as they have served campaigns. There was once a law in Macedonia that he who had not killed an enemy should wear a halter, and among the Scythians no one who had not slain his man was allowed to drink out of the cup which was handed round at a certain feast. Among the Iberians, a warlike nation, the number of enemies whom a man has slain is indicated by the number of obelisks which are fixed in the earth round his tomb; and there are numerous practices among other nations of a like kind, some of them established by law and others by custom. Yet to a reflecting mind it must appear very strange that the statesman should be always considering how he can dominate and tyrannize over others, whether they will or not. How can that which is not even lawful be the business of the statesman or the legislator? Unlawful it certainly is to rule without regard to justice, for there may be might where there is no right. The other arts and sciences offer no parallel a physician is not expected to persuade or coerce his patients, nor a pilot the passengers in his ship. Yet most men appear to think that the art of despotic government is statesmanship, and what men affirm to be unjust and inexpedient in their own case they are not ashamed of practicing towards others; they demand just rule for themselves, but where other men are concerned they care nothing about it. Such behavior is irrational; unless the one party is, and the other is not, born to serve, in which case men have a right to command, not indeed all their fellows, but only those who are intended to be subjects; just as we ought not to hunt mankind, whether for food or sacrifice, but only the animals which may be hunted for food or sacrifice, this is to say, such wild animals as are eatable. And surely there may be a city happy in isolation, which we will assume to be well-governed (for it is quite possible that a city thus isolated might be well-administered and have good laws); but such a city would not be constituted with any view to war or the conquest of enemies- all that sort of thing must be excluded. Hence we see very plainly that warlike pursuits, although generally to be deemed honorable, are not the supreme end of all things, but only means. And the good lawgiver should inquire how states and races of men and communities may participate in a good life, and in the happiness which is attainable by them. His enactments will not be always the same; and where there are neighbors he will have to see what sort of studies should be practiced in relation to their several characters, or how the measures appropriate in relation to each are to be adopted. The end at which the best form of government should aim may be properly made a matter of future consideration.

Let us now address those who, while they agree that the life of virtue is the most eligible, differ about the manner of practicing it. For some renounce political power, and think that the life of the freeman is different from the life of the statesman
and the best of all; but others think the life of the statesman best. The argument of the latter is that he who does nothing cannot do well, and that virtuous activity is identical with happiness. To both we say: 'you are partly right and partly wrong;' first class are right in affirming that the life of the freeman is better than the life of the despot; for there is nothing grand or noble in having the use of a slave, in so far as he is a slave; or in issuing commands about necessary things. But it is an error to suppose that every sort of rule is despotic like that of a master over slaves, for there is as great a difference between the rule over freemen and the rule over slaves as there is between slavery by nature and freedom by nature, about which I have said enough at the commencement of this treatise. And it is equally a mistake to place inactivity above action, for happiness is activity, and the actions of the just and wise are the realization of much that is noble.

But perhaps some one, accepting these premises, may still maintain that supreme power is the best of all things, because the possessors of it are able to perform the greatest number of noble actions. if so, the man who is able to rule, instead of giving up anything to his neighbor, ought rather to take away his power; and the father should make no account of his son, nor the son of his father, nor friend of friend; they should not bestow a thought on one another in comparison with this higher object, for the best is the most eligible and 'doing eligible' and 'doing well' is the best. There might be some truth in such a view if we assume that robbers and plunderers attain the chief good. But this can never be; their hypothesis is false. For the actions of a ruler cannot really be honorable, unless he is as much superior to other men as a husband is to a wife, or a father to his children, or a master to his slaves. And therefore he who violates the law can never recover by any success, however great, what he has already lost in departing from virtue. For equals the honorable and the just consist in sharing alike, as is just and equal. But that the unequal should be given to equals, and the unlike to those who are like, is contrary to nature, and nothing which is contrary to nature is good. If, therefore, there is any one superior in virtue and in the power of performing the best actions, him we ought to follow and obey, but he must have the capacity for action as well as virtue.

If we are right in our view, and happiness is assumed to be virtuous activity, the active life will be the best, both for every city collectively, and for individuals. Not that a life of action must necessarily have relation to others, as some persons think, nor are those ideas only to be regarded as practical which are pursued for the sake of practical results, but much more the thoughts and contemplations which are independent and complete in themselves; since virtuous activity, and therefore a certain kind of action, is an end, and even in the case of external actions the directing mind is most truly said to act. Neither, again, is it necessary that states which are cut off from others and choose to live alone should be inactive; for activity, as well as other things, may take place by sections; there are many ways in which the sections of a state act upon one another. The same thing is equally true of every individual. If this were otherwise, God and the universe, who have no external actions over and above their own energies, would be far enough from perfection. Hence it is evident that the same life is best for each individual, and for states and for mankind collectively
St. Thomas Aquinas  
*Summa Theologica*  
First Part of the Second Part  

Question 90  
Article 2

Whether the law is always something directed to the common good?

Objection 1: It would seem that the law is not always directed to the common good as to its end. For it belongs to law to command and to forbid. But commands are directed to certain individual goods. Therefore the end of the law is not always the common good.

Objection 2: Further, the law directs man in his actions. But human actions are concerned with particular matters. Therefore the law is directed to some particular good.

Objection 3: Further, Isidore says (Etym. v, 3): "If the law is based on reason, whatever is based on reason will be a law." But reason is the foundation not only of what is ordained to the common good, but also of that which is directed private good. Therefore the law is not only directed to the good of all, but also to the private good of an individual.

On the contrary, Isidore says (Etym. v, 21) that "laws are enacted for no private profit, but for the common benefit of the citizens."

I answer that, As stated above (A[1]), the law belongs to that which is a principle of human acts, because it is their rule and measure. Now as reason is a principle of human acts, so in reason itself there is something which is the principle in respect of all the rest: wherefore to this principle chiefly and mainly law must needs be referred. Now the first principle in practical matters, which are the object of the practical reason, is the last end: and the last end of human life is bliss or happiness, as stated above (Q[2], A[7]; Q[3], A[1]). Consequently the law must needs regard principally the relationship to happiness. Moreover, since every part is ordained to the whole, as imperfect to perfect; and since one man is a part of the perfect community, the law must needs regard properly the relationship to universal happiness. Wherefore the Philosopher, in the above definition of legal matters mentions both happiness and the body politic: for he says (Ethic. v, 1) that we call those legal matters "just, which are adapted to produce and preserve happiness and its parts for the body politic": since the state is a perfect community, as he says in Polit. i, 1.

Now in every genus, that which belongs to it chiefly is the principle of the others, and the others belong to that genus in subordination to that thing: thus fire, which is chief among hot things, is the cause of heat in mixed bodies, and these are said to be hot in so far as they have a share of fire. Consequently, since the law is chiefly ordained to the common good, any other precept in regard to some individual work, must needs be devoid of the nature of a law, save in so far as it regards the common good. Therefore every law is ordained to the common good.

Reply to Objection 1: A command denotes an application of a law to matters regulated by the law. Now the order to the common good, at which the law aims, is applicable to
particular ends. And in this way commands are given even concerning particular matters.

Reply to Objection 2: Actions are indeed concerned with particular matters: but those particular matters are referable to the common good, not as to a common genus or species, but as to a common final cause, according as the common good is said to be the common end.

Reply to Objection 3: Just as nothing stands firm with regard to the speculative reason except that which is traced back to the first indemonstrable principles, so nothing stands firm with regard to the practical reason, unless it be directed to the last end which is the common good: and whatever stands to reason in this sense, has the nature of a law.

Question 96
Article 3

Whether human law prescribes acts of all the virtues?

Objection 1: It would seem that human law does not prescribe acts of all the virtues. For vicious acts are contrary to acts of virtue. But human law does not prohibit all vices, as stated above (A[2]). Therefore neither does it prescribe all acts of virtue.

Objection 2: Further, a virtuous act proceeds from a virtue. But virtue is the end of law; so that whatever is from a virtue, cannot come under a precept of law. Therefore human law does not prescribe all acts of virtue.

Objection 3: Further, law is ordained to the common good, as stated above (Q[90], A[2]). But some acts of virtue are ordained, not to the common good, but to private good. Therefore the law does not prescribe all acts of virtue.

On the contrary, The Philosopher says (Ethic. v, 1) that the law "prescribes the performance of the acts of a brave man . . . and the acts of the temperate man . . . and the acts of the meek man: and in like manner as regards the other virtues and vices, prescribing the former, forbidding the latter."

I answer that, The species of virtues are distinguished by their objects, as explained above (Q[54], A[2]; Q[60], A[1]; Q[62], A[2]). Now all the objects of virtues can be referred either to the private good of an individual, or to the common good of the multitude: thus matters of fortitude may be achieved either for the safety of the state, or for upholding the rights of a friend, and in like manner with the other virtues. But law, as stated above (Q[90], A[2]) is ordained to the common good. Wherefore there is no virtue whose acts cannot be prescribed by the law. Nevertheless human law does not prescribe concerning all the acts of every virtue: but only in regard to those that are ordainable to the common good—either immediately, as when certain things are done directly for the common good—or mediately, as when a lawgiver prescribes certain things pertaining to good order, whereby the citizens are directed in the upholding of the common good of justice and peace.

Reply to Objection 1: Human law does not forbid all vicious acts, by the obligation of a precept, as neither does it prescribe all acts of virtue. But it forbids certain acts of each vice, just as it prescribes some acts of each virtue.
Reply to Objection 2: An act is said to be an act of virtue in two ways. First, from the fact that a man does something virtuous; thus the act of justice is to do what is right, and an act of fortitude is to do brave things: and in this way law prescribes certain acts of virtue. Secondly an act of virtue is when a man does a virtuous thing in a way in which a virtuous man does it. Such an act always proceeds from virtue: and it does not come under a precept of law, but is the end at which every lawgiver aims.

Reply to Objection 3: There is no virtue whose act is not ordainable to the common good, as stated above, either mediately or immediately.
That The Office Of Governing The Kingdom Should Be Learned From The Divine Government

[102] Just as the founding of a city or kingdom may suitably be learned from the way in which the world was created, so too the way to govern may be learned from the divine government of the world.

[103] Before going into that, however, we should consider that to govern is to lead the thing governed in a suitable way towards its proper end. Thus a ship is said to be governed when, through the skill of the pilot, it is brought unharmed and by a direct route to harbor. Consequently, if a thing be directed to an end outside itself (as a ship to the harbor), it is the governor’s duty, not only to preserve the thing unharmed, but further to guide it towards this end. If, on the contrary, there be a thing whose end is not outside itself, then the governor’s endeavors will merely tend to preserve the thing undamaged in its proper perfection.

Now if man were not ordained to another end outside himself, the above-mentioned cares would be sufficient for him. But as long as man’s mortal life endures there is an extrinsic good for him, namely, final beatitude which is looked for after death in the enjoyment of God, for as the Apostle says (2 Cor 5:6): “As long as we are in the body we are far from the Lord.” Consequently the Christian man, for whom that beatitude has been purchased by the blood of Christ, and who, in order to attain it, has received the earnest of the Holy Spirit, needs another and spiritual care to direct him to the harbor of eternal salvation, and this care is provided for the faithful by the ministers of the Church of Christ.

[106] Now the same judgment is to be formed about the end of society as a whole as about the end of one man. If, therefore, the ultimate end of man were some good that existed in himself, then the ultimate end of the multitude to be governed would likewise be for the multitude to acquire such good, and persevere in its possession. If such an ultimate end either of an individual man or a multitude were a corporeal one, namely, life and health of body, to govern would then be a physician’s charge. If that ultimate end were an abundance of wealth, then knowledge of economics would have the last word in the community’s government. If the good of the knowledge of truth were of such a kind that the multitude might attain to it, the king would have to be a teacher. It is, however, clear that the end of a multitude gathered together is to live virtuously. For men form a group for the purpose of living well Footnote together, a thing which the individual man living alone could...
not attain, and good life is virtuous life. Therefore, virtuous life is the end for which men gather together. The evidence for this lies in the fact that only those who render mutual assistance to one another in living well form a genuine part of an assembled multitude. If men assembled merely to live, then animals and slaves would form a part of the civil community. Or, if men assembled only to accrue wealth, then all those who traded together would belong to one city. Yet we see that only such are regarded as forming one multitude as are directed by the same laws and the same government to live well.

[107] Yet through virtuous living man is further ordained to a higher end, which consists in the enjoyment of God, as we have said above. Consequently, since society must have the same end as the individual man, it is not the ultimate end of an assembled multitude to live virtuously, but through virtuous living to attain to the possession of God.

[108] If this end could be attained by the power of human nature, then the duty of a king would have to include the direction of men to it. We are supposing, of course, that he is called king to whom the supreme power of governing in human affairs is entrusted. Now the higher the end to which a government is ordained, the loftier that government is. Indeed, we always find that the one to whom it pertains to achieve the final end commands those who execute the things that are ordained to that end. For example, the captain, whose business it is to regulate navigation, tells the shipbuilder what kind of ship he must construct to be suitable for navigation; and the ruler of a city, who makes use of arms, tells the blacksmith what kind of arms to make. But because a man does not attain his end, which is the possession of God, by human power but by divine according to the words of the Apostle (Rom 6:23): “By the grace of God life everlasting”—therefore the task of leading him to that last end does not pertain to human but to divine government.

[109] Consequently, government of this kind pertains to that king who is not only a man, but also God, namely, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who by making men sons of God brought them to the glory of Heaven. This then is the government which has been delivered to Him and which “shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7:14), on account of which He is called, in Holy Writ, not Priest only, but King. As Jeremiah says (23:5): “The king shall reign and he shall be wise.” Hence a royal priesthood is derived from Him, and what is more, all those who believe in Christ, in so far as they are His members, are called kings and priests.

[110] Thus, in order that spiritual things might be distinguished from earthly things, the ministry of this kingdom has been entrusted not to earthly kings but to priests, and most of all to the chief priest, the successor of St. Peter, the Vicar of Christ, the Roman Pontiff. To him all the kings of the Christian People Footnote are to be subject as to our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Footnote For those to whom pertains the care of intermediate ends should be subject to him to whom pertains the care of the ultimate end, and be directed by his rule.

[111] Because the priesthood of the gentiles and the whole worship of their gods existed merely for the acquisition of temporal goods (which were all ordained to the common good of the multitude, whose care devolved upon the king), the priests of the gentiles were very properly subject to the kings. Similarly, since in the old law earthly goods were promised to the religious people (not indeed by demons but by the true God), the priests of the old law, we read, were also subject to the kings. But in the new law there is a higher priesthood by which men are guided to heavenly goods. Consequently, in the law of Christ, kings must be subject to priests.
It was therefore also a marvelous disposition of Divine Providence that, in the city of Rome, which God had foreseen would be the principal seat of the Christian priesthood, the custom was gradually established that the rulers of the city should be subject to the priests, for as Valerius Maximus relates [De Bello Gallico VI, 13, 5]: “Our city has always considered that everything should yield precedence to religion, even those things in which it aimed to display the splendor of supreme majesty. We therefore unhesitatingly made the imperial dignity minister to religion, considering that the empire would thus hold control of human affairs if faithfully and constantly it were submissive to the divine power.

And because it was to come to pass that the religion of the Christian priesthood should especially thrive in France, God provided that among the Gauls too their tribal priests, called Druids, should lay down the law of all Gaul, as Julius Caesar relates in the book which he wrote about the Gallic war.

Book II
Chapter 4

That Regal Government Should Be Ordained Principally To Eternal Beatitude

As the life by which men live well here on earth is ordained, as to its end, to that blessed life which we hope for in heaven, so too whatever particular goods are procured by man’s agency—whether wealth, profits, health, eloquence, or learning—are ordained to the good life of the multitude. If, then, as we have said, the person who is charged with the care of our ultimate end ought to be over those who have charge of things ordained to that end, and to direct them by his rule, it clearly follows that, just as the king ought to be subject to the divine government administered by the office of priesthood, so he ought to preside over all human offices, and regulate them by the rule of his government.

Now anyone on whom it devolves to do something which is ordained to another thing as to its end is bound to see that his work is suitable to that end; thus, for example, the armorer so fashions the sword that it is suitable for fighting, and the builder should so lay out the house that it is suitable for habitation. Therefore, since the beatitude of heaven is the end of that virtuous life which we live at present, it pertains to the king’s office to promote the good life of the multitude in such a way as to make it suitable for the attainment of heavenly happiness, that is to say, he should command those things which lead to the happiness of Heaven and, as far as possible, forbid the contrary.

What conduces to true beatitude and what hinders it are learned from the law of God, the teaching of which belongs to the office of the priest, according to the words of Malachi (2:7): “The lips of the priest shall guard knowledge and they shall seek the law from his mouth.” Wherefore the Lord prescribes in the Book of Deuteronomy (17:18-19) that “after he is raised to the throne of his kingdom, the king shall copy out to himself the Deuteronomy of this law, in a volume, taking the copy of the priests of the Levitical tribe, he shall have it with him and shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, and keep his words and ceremonies which are commanded in the law.” Thus the king, taught the law of God, should have for his principal concern the means by which the multitude subject to him may live well.
preserve it once established; and third, having preserved it, to promote its greater perfection.

[118] For an individual man to lead a good life two things are required. The first and most important is to act in a virtuous manner (for virtue is that by which one lives well); the second, which is secondary and instrumental, is a sufficiency of those bodily goods which use is necessary for virtuous life. Yet the unity of man is brought about by nature, while the unity of multitude, which we call peace, must be procured through the efforts of the ruler. Therefore, to establish virtuous living in a multitude three things are necessary. First of all, that the multitude be established in the unity of peace. Second, that the multitude thus united in the bond of peace, be directed to acting well. For just as a man can do nothing well unless unity within his members be presupposed, so a multitude of men lacking the unity of peace will be hindered from virtuous action by the fact that it is fighting against itself. In the third place, it is necessary that there be at hand a sufficient supply of the things required for proper living, procured by the ruler’s efforts.

[119] When virtuous living is set up in the multitude by the efforts of the king, it then remains for him to look to its conservation. Now there are three things which prevent the permanence of the public good. One of these arises from nature. The good of the multitude should not be established for one time only; it should be in a sense perpetual. Men, on the other hand, cannot abide forever, because they are mortal. Even while they are alive they do not always preserve the same vigor, for the life of man is subject to many changes, and thus a man is not equally suited to the performance of the same duties throughout the whole span of his life. A second impediment to the preservation of the public good, which comes from within, consists in the perversity of the wills of men, inasmuch as they are either too lazy to perform what the commonweal demands, or, still further, they are harmful to the peace of the multitude because, by transgressing justice, they disturb the peace of others. The third hindrance to the preservation of the commonweal comes from without, namely, when peace is destroyed through the attacks of enemies and, as it sometimes happens, the kingdom or city is completely blotted out.

[120] In regard to these three dangers, a triple charge is laid upon the king. First of all, he must take care of the appointment of men to succeed or replace others in charge of the various offices. Just as in regard to corruptible things (which cannot remain the same forever) the government of God made provision that through generation one would take the place of another in order that, in this way, the integrity of the universe might be maintained, so too the good of the multitude subject to the king will be preserved through his care when he sets himself to attend to the appointment of new men to fill the place of those who drop out. In the second place, by his laws and orders, punishments and rewards, he should restrain the men subject to him from wickedness and induce them to virtuous deeds, following the example of God, Who gave His law to man and requites those who observe it with rewards, and those who transgress it with punishments. The king’s third charge is to keep the multitude entrusted to him safe from the enemy, for it would be useless to prevent internal dangers if the multitude could not be defended against external dangers.

[121] Finally, for the proper direction of the multitude there remains the third duty of the kingly office, namely, that he be solicitous for its improvement. He performs this duty when, in each of the things we have mentioned, he corrects what is out of order and supplies what is lacking, and if any of them can be done better he tries to do so. This is why the
Apostle exhorts the faithful to be “zealous for the better gifts” (1 Cor 12:31).

[122] These then are the duties of the kingly office, each of which must now be treated in greater detail.
Chapter I

What is a Human Society?

In order to face the political, economic, social and ideological problems with which modern man is confronted, it is undoubtedly necessary to establish political parties, to publish manifestos, to promulgate laws and decrees, to make long-term plans, etc. This is all very well, but it risks not getting to the root of the difficulties. I believe that it is important above all to think through again the most fundamental questions. Because, what is going to happen in twenty years? What then will be the real human problems, of which today we are totally ignorant? We first need to prepare ourselves to address new situations, to become capable of taking them up right at their roots, in order to respond to them in the right way. We cannot be content with rapid thoughts and cookie-cutter judgments. We need to travel the slow way of deepening reflection.

So let us return to some common and fundamental questions. Why does man live in society, and in different forms of society? Why is he called a social and political animal? We will begin to discuss this subject by investigating its most basic principle, the aim of political society, the finality of the life of man as a social and political animal. This basic principle is happiness. We will not aim for a complete explanation, because that would take too long, but we will simply try to open up and untangle some large avenues, and state precisely a certain number of points.

Thus, let us take things back to their foundation, beginning with a great text from the beginning of Aristotle’s Politics, from which we will reread the first paragraph, which at first seems to be so simple:

Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.

In this beautiful and wise work, Aristotle raises two problems: first, that concerning the affirmation of the finality of political society and human societies in general; second, that concerning the determination of the finality proper to political society (in view of what end is political society constituted?)

The great originality of the beginning of the Politics, in contrast to the modern way of conceiving and looking at human things (social, political, economic, etc.), comes from this: Aristotle begins his consideration of political society by insisting upon, by forcing us to look upon the finality of this society. To comprehend political society, we need to consider first the end for the sake of which it has been created, the goal to which it looks: every community is constituted with a view towards a certain good (the good for which we do anything is what we call the end, the final cause). Here Aristotle underlines the general rule of all human action, which applies equally well to the political community. Every human act that man performs insofar as he is man, that is, using his reason and deliberate will, is done with a view to an end: you get dressed to go out, you work to earn your crust of bread, you take your medicine to regain your health, you fight to achieve victory, etc. Every since Cain, men have built villages and come together with an end in mind; perhaps Cain did this so that he would not have to wander the face of the earth, so that he could stay in one place;
Afterwards men built villages to defend themselves, to help each other, to guarantee the permanence of their way of life, etc.

It is necessary to note the first point in the text of Aristotle, and the very simple and “perfect accord” which he then lays down in the prologue to his Politics; from the start, he manifests a twofold fact: the pursuit of an end in the constitution of the city and, more generally, the pursuit of an end in all human activity. He does not begin by positing a definition or an *a priori* principle concerning what a political community ought to be; rather he simply manifests the truth of a fact. We only have to open our eyes and look: every time men act as men, they act with a view to an end, and the political community does not escape this very general rule: it too is constituted with a view to an end. Thus, the entirely original starting point of his whole reflection on politics is not an *a priori* affirmation, an ideal postulate, nor it is a theoretical deduction or an arbitrary position. It is a manifestation of a fact.

Moreover, the way in which Aristotle proceeds here corresponds to that which, for him, is completely essential in considering the moral life of men. The great principle of moral philosophy, its starting point – he often repeats this – is *the fact that*. In human affairs, with which ethics and politics are concerned, we always begin with *the fact that*. Moral philosophy, in the perspective in which we are now trying to understand it, does not have for its starting point the Good in itself, nor the moral rule as a sort of absolute, posited *a priori* in all of its universality, as for example: “it is necessary to do good and avoid evil;” this is not where moral philosophy begins for Aristotle, and if you take this kind of principle as the starting point of your teaching, you’ll be unlikely to get the attention of your students.

Moral philosophy begins with the statement that men pursue goods and ends, and not only ends which are good; in fact, it not only asserts that good men pursue good ends (of course, in moral philosophy, we really do desire good men and good ends), but it begins with the observation that men pursue good and bad ends, ends which appear good to them and really are good, and ends which appear good but really are not. This is why we have said: “Men act and perform all of their actions in order to obtain what *appears* good to them.” “What appears good,” even if it is not, as for example, the bottle for the drunk. Thus, we begin with a statement of fact and not with an *a priori* definition of the good. I think that this is very important for moral philosophy. Today we revolt against morals, we reject them, in particular abstract morals, the morals of duty and imperatives, which begin from the affirmation of grand principles: “Thou shalt not steal, thou shalt do good and avoid evil,” etc. These grand principles are conclusions at which we arrive, but the correct way of reflecting upon these matters does not begin there.

Thus, we come to state: all men act with a view to an end and consequently all human communities are constituted with a view to an end. This entirely ordinary observation is so common that we do not think that it is worthwhile to take our time over it; the economic and political sciences, and other eminent disciplines do not lower themselves to such basic platitudes.

But, it is precisely the case – and this is the second point to note in the text of Aristotle – that the finality of political society (and in general of human activity) is not only an easily stated fact, it is also the reason for its being. Aristotle posits the end as the starting point of political science because it is the first principle, the first cause, and the fundamental reason for the *existence* of the city. Not only does the end, the
good, the goal for the sake of which the city is instituted give the reason for its existence, it also is what manifests it and defines it, giving an account of its *nature*. Insofar as we do not know that with a view to what a city is formed, we do not know what a political society is. It is not enough to take up at some point the consideration of its end; we must *begin* there in order to understand any society whatsoever. If we do not know what its end is, how can we understand political society and be in any way directive of it? We can know a lot about a house, have a summary of its contents and an enormous accumulation of information about it, but to the degree that we do not know *why* it was built, what it is for, to what end it is destined, we do not really know what a house it, nor how it should be built.

**Finality and nature**

Thus, it is necessary to continue to reflect upon what “end” and “finality” mean. An end is not simply a good that we have before ourselves, outside ourselves, to which we aspire and towards which we tend. An end is something else: it is also present in the being which it completes as a disposition, as an interior adaptation, as a proportion and a propensity. You know very well that you cannot make a saw out of wool, trousers out of concrete, or a bed out of cream. It is always necessary that the matter in itself be adapted to the end for which it is destined.

This adaption, this interior ordering, is not a dynamism, not a force, nor an impetus or an impulsive energy; in sum, it is not an agent cause. Certainly, all these are necessary in order to obtain the end, to make it real, to be brought effectively to the end, but what we are speaking of here is something much more interior and coming much before all the developments of energy: it is the internal ordering of a being towards its end, towards the end for the sake of which it is intimately constituted. The real aptitude of the wood to become a desk certainly demands the efficient activity of the carpenter, but what we are looking at now is not this necessary activity: it is the disposition of the matter, wood, to be sawed and shaped. This disposition, this aptitude as such is not yet an impulsion nor a principle of efficient causality. Speaking metaphorically, we say that it is an intention and not yet a force making something real. This internal ordering of a being to an end can be more or less profound; thus, the aptitude of wood to be smoothed, real as it might be, is not the most intimate ordering in the nature of wood. Much more radical and interior is its aptitude and ordering to be a living tree, to preserve itself in existence through nourishment and growth, through bearing fruit and all the other workings of life. When the disposition and ordering to an end is so profound that it is identified with the most intimate constitution of the being, then we have a case of what we can call a *nature*. When we speak of the nature of a reality, we mean that, in its most intimate being, it is oriented towards an end, not by a superficial orientation, but by a most profound orientation.

The word “nature” has many senses; we constantly use it according to different meanings. For example, we speak of the “nature” of a triangle, the “nature” of metal or of a table, in order to define realities possessing characteristics which distinguish them from others: the triangle is not a circle, brass is not gold. But more radically and more profoundly, the word “nature” designates something a little different; it defines a being not only insofar as it is this and not that, distinguishing it from others, but also insofar as it is opened and turned to an end, towards a fulfillment of itself precisely through the acquisition of an end which is fitting to it. The “nature” of a being, in this sense, is its ultimate perfection, the completion
for which it was made, insofar as the expectation of this perfection is stamped, is inserted into its very being. Thus, in what it is, in what constitutes such a being, the appeal to an ultimate fulfillment is thoroughly inscribed: perfection, the achievement of an end to be attained. This is why we can speak of the nature of a being, that is, its end, in the idea that, in the expectation of the end, the end is already in some way present and is already at work in the being which it completes. When we speak of the end, it is always necessary to consider that the end is a goal, an exterior goal placed outside the being which tends towards it, but that this goal is not simply exterior to it: it has an interior echo, it supposes that there is in the being completed through it an ordering, a kind of interior intention to be completed by the possession of the end.

To reflect on all this is indispensable for understanding, not only the great texts of Aristotle, in particular his cosmology, but above all the *Politics*; otherwise, we make all sorts of blunders, mistakes with disastrous consequences. For example, when Aristotle says, a little later in our text, that political society is natural to man, what is he trying to say? Does he mean that this society is given to man by nature? No, political society is not at all natural in the sense that it is created, given all at once to men, in the way that ants are given the anthill, and the termites their nest, which is by instinct. In saying that “men always perform their actions with a view to the good,” Aristotle even affirms the contrary. The city is a community constituted with a view to an end, to a good. If the city is something made by man, constituted by his actions, it is not given to him by nature, it is not natural in this sense. The natural does not simply consist in the necessity of a fact. The phrase “by nature” denotes something much more profound. When Aristotle says that society is natural to man, he is trying to say that it is demanded by his nature, it is demanded by that in him which is most interior; human nature demands it so profoundly that, without society, without the city, man absolutely cannot develop himself, nor can he carry himself fully as a man. Aristotle is here concerned with nature viewed from the aspect of the end, as an interior ordering of man towards a ultimate fulfillment, ultimate completion.

**Is society natural to man?**

Let me insist upon this point, because it is a great problem, a great subject of debate. It often happens that, in the discussion of this kind of question, in order to avoid one error, we throw ourselves into the opposite error, but that at root we remain in fundamentally the same error, an error common to the two contrary affirmations. Now there are those who say that society is not natural because it is the effect of human liberty, because it involves man-made conventions and arrangements. Society, they say, takes its birth from a contract, and this is not a natural reality, but purely a convention. Its creation is undoubtedly necessary, but it is entirely artificial. Such is the thought of Hobbes, taken up again by Rousseau. Let us grant that society is a product of reason, of art, of human artifice, but to conclude from this that it is not natural is a serious mistake, a serious lapse in reasoning which can lead to the greatest evils. This is why, in order to counter those who completely “denaturalize” society under the pretext that it is constituted and instituted through human convention, others, such as Auguste Comte, in reaction against the dangers of such a position, throw themselves into the opposite position: society does not wait to come into existence until men wish for it, it does not depend upon their consent: society is given to men by nature. For man, they say, society is an absolutely necessary condition for his very existence, independent of his will. For
Comte, society is a natural reality, it has laws like the laws of physics, laws of its organization and development, laws independent of reason and will, to which reason and will must submit.

These two opposes theses rest upon the same error: they consider as natural only those things which are given by nature, already made real and produced by it. This is the common foundation of the opposite conceptions about which we will speak. If you posit as a general principle, and a basis of your reasoning: “what is natural to man is what is produced by nature,” you could either conclude that society is not natural, since it is not arranged by nature but by art and human industry; or on the other hand, you can conclude that society is given by nature since, in fact, man has a physical need for it in order to lead a normal life: thus, society is natural to him. Both sides suppose the same principle, “what is natural to man is produced by nature,” but they arrive at radically different conclusions: society is artificial and conventional, or society is a natural condition of human life. Moreover, these contrary positions are founded upon another common principle no less destructive, namely, the total separation of nature and reason.

What is true, really? Each proposition is true in part, each of the two theses sees correctly up to a certain point. On the one hand, it is true that political society is in some way prepared for by nature. Undoubtedly, nature furnishes the constituent elements of domestic society: nature makes men and women; but nature itself absolutely refuses to produce citizens, Senators, or Presidents! That is not its business. It is true that men are often unsociable; far from having an inclination towards their neighbors, often they think only of defending themselves, and exploiting and dominating others. All this is too true. The error is not in these assertions. It is in taking that conclusion to its extreme: “Thus, man is not naturally political.” We forget that man can be deprived of what his nature demands.

However, it is also true that nature furnishes to man a certain number of means to lead a human life. For example, nature gives man the hand as an instrument of his intelligence, or again nature inscribes in his mind, in a manner of speaking, the first principle of speculative reason: “The same thing cannot, at the same time, both be and not be.” This is the very first principle that we receive because it is as it were a light given to us by nature itself. Likewise, nature inscribes in our reason and in our hearts the first principles of practical reason, such as “Do good and avoid evil.” Thus, there is something true in the position of Comte: society is a natural reality which we cannot abandon to the indefinite and arbitrary chances of human reasoning and misreasoning. Only, there is an error in deducing from this that society is a natural reality that precedes reason and will.

Nature gives the first foundations of society and, with the union of husband and wife, it organizes the beginning of society. But note that nature, which in this way gives the indispensable first bases, remains very stingy about the rest of the organization of society; it lets man untangle the rest by himself. Nature equips man with the first principles and first instruments, but then it is necessary for man himself to apply them, it is necessary that he learn to use them, and there nature has left him to himself. The first gifts of nature, its first beginnings are marvelous, but to think that what is natural is only what nature actually provides for us is to completely, seriously, even irredeemably falsify the very notion of nature. This is what would betray us if we held a positivist conception of the facts. But it is necessary to look at the facts more attentively and more essentially,: the most profound aspect of
nature must be sought for in an end, in an ultimate end, in a supreme fulfillment.

The two opposed theses of which we are speaking both seem true and claim to appeal to the facts. It is true to say, on the one hand, that nature has given certain beginnings of society; on the other hand, it is true to say that political society, civilization, etc., with all of their developments, does not come fully formed from the hands of nature; man must act, his industry and art must intervene to assure their full unfolding.

This is why the principle, “What is natural is what is given by nature, before the intervention of our will and choices,” must be entirely rejected. This presupposition is completely deceptive because it hides, even eliminates, the notion of nature as an orientation, as an inclination towards an end. We must see that it is only the conception of nature as end that will rightly enable us to respond in an ample, profound and dominant way to the danger of an opinion which sees in society and in civilization only the work of reason, of convention, of technology, of construction, and of human industry, so that nature plays no part.

We should have a dread of such theories because they carry with them a very real risk: the danger of the arbitrary, of the purely conventional, and this is the ruin of society. Such was the position of the sophists, which finally lead to the destruction of their society. It is normal to guard ourselves against such theories, but the best means of defending ourselves is not to go to the other extreme and say, “Let us go back to what nature itself procures for us, to that which it effectively gives, and let us forget that nature is essentially an inclination to an end.”

In fact, there is an entirely different response that we can make. Suppose I asked you the question: Are the cobbler and the chef natural? Or, to take more noble subjects: Are the syllogism, the work of art, or the tragedy of Hamlet natural? Let us return to the cobbler: is his object natural or not? Certainly not in the sense in which natural would only mean “produced by nature.” After all, we are not born wearing shoes! But, why are there shoes? Shoes exists because they allow gentlemen and ladies to walk more easily, without injuring their feet, without getting them dirty or cold. In fact stingy nature does not give shoes to man as she does to the horse. Shoes help us walk more easily, but walking itself is a natural operation. Thus, an object which is a product of reason, of art, of human technique, for all that does not escape the order of nature. On the contrary, this object is made to allow nature to correspond more completely, more easily, and more freely with the end towards which it tends. What we have discovered with our cobbler, we will find again in many domains, in all the lower and higher places in this immense complex of the products of reason and of the techniques from which our cities and civilizations are composed.

All of these products are made by man, not given “pre-cooked” by nature. These arrangements, constructions, and inventions of man precisely allow him to respond in the most complete and perfect way to the inclination of his nature towards an end, towards the supreme good. But society is one of the realities produced by man with a view to an end. Thus we can affirm that political society is not natural in the sense that it is fabricated by nature, but it is natural in the sense that it answers to, it permits man to respond to the fervent wish of his nature, to the inclination of his nature towards a perfection of life and activity which precisely constitutes him in his human nature. At the very root of his nature man is oriented towards society as towards his best fulfillment. Society is the exterior environment necessary for human life, and it is also a creation of man, but based upon something fundamental: the deep
ordering of human nature to the city. Nature does not give the ultimate good, but it does demand it. This is the sense in which we must understand that man is a naturally political animal.

Modern science and finality

These reflections, rapidly outlined and taking their starting points from the simple considerations which we are always in danger of neglecting, are very fundamental. It all seems very simple, but it is necessary never to turn away from these first truths; even though they are so simple they hide great consequences, if we take the time to reflect upon them.

This conception of nature as ordered to an end, this acknowledgement of the order of human nature to human society, and of the order of society to the good of human nature, encounters great obstacles in the modern mind, not because it is opposed to the common and natural way of thinking, but because of the imposition of a modern vision of the world. One of the characteristics of this conception of the world is precisely the erasure, the elimination of human finality, and consequently, the obliteration of nature.

Let us leave aside for a moment human affairs and politics in order to look at the realm of cosmology. Aristotle has written, not only the Politics, but also On the Heavens, which presents a conception of the world which in our day has been clearly surpassed: it assumes that the earth is at the center of the world, that the four fundamental elements – earth, air, fire and water – form all of bodies under the moon, and that, above them, there is a fifth element of a superior order, which we call the “quintessence,” an element specifically different from the other four, from which the stars are made, etc. All of this has disappeared with modern science! But how can this completely obsolete cosmology be mixed with the depth of thought of a great genius?

You see, the opposition between the contemporary vision of the world – that which has appeared since the birth of modern science, beginning, let us say, with Galileo – and that of Aristotle, is not really a matter of geocentrism or the quintessence, nor of the story of the four elements borrowed from Empedocles; all that is secondary. The true difference is this: Aristotle holds that, in the physical world and in the organization of the universe, the perfection of the end is a principle and cause of explanation. But this is precisely that which we do not allow in our modern vision of the universe. We moderns have embarked on a wholly different path.

To begin, I will say that Aristotle insists upon facts, upon what is in front of our eyes. The principle of all moral philosophy and of all political philosophy is the manifestation of a fact, namely that men desire goods and act to obtain them. Even in moral and political matters, in which it seems that ideas should hold the first place, Aristotle takes for his starting point the observation of human activity. You will say to me: but one of the characteristics of the new conception of the world, of the scientific attitude of modern man, is precisely to take an interest in the particular, in the facts. That is what we first pay attention to. So, you might ask, how Aristotle, in setting himself to observe the facts, is any different? This point of view, moreover, is not uniquely his own; in a general way the Ancients were very interested in the facts. Take historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides, they were marvelous in their recollection and description of human facts. This was also a preoccupation of Democritus. Thus, we might say that there is no difference between the ancient and the modern conception. But the interest in facts in Antiquity, above all in Aristotle, and the interest in facts in the modern scientific
vision, are in reality fundamentally different; the notion of “fact” is not understood in the same way.

The modern scientific vision grasps, indeed, clings to facts, that is, to the phenomena which it observes, but it leaves aside everything which can be revealed in the facts as an inclination or ordering to an end, everything that can be related to the intention of an end. We no longer wish in any way to occupy ourselves with the meaning of the world, the “reason why” of things. We hold onto what is called the “brute fact.” There is a very remarkable formulation of the notion of “brute fact” in the work of Jacques Monod called *Chance and Necessity*. There he shows that what interests the expert is the object as object. For actual science, the object must not carry with it a “project,” that is, an intention of the end, a tendency towards an end. The object must be imagines without a “project.” But in biology, the “project” is very difficult to eliminate, it is difficult to exclude the end or goal completely in the realm of the living. But for the expert, no, it does not exist; such a fact, as such, does not exist.

This is what characterizes the positivistic attitude. For positivists, only the fact counts. But what kind of fact? For the positivist a fact of the kind which Aristotle affirms, namely, that all men pursue ends, is not a fact. Why? Because when you say that all men pursue ends, you are not simply affirming the phenomena in their brute state: you are manifesting in that fact, in the action of man, an intention, an end, a goal. You leave observation behind, since this no longer answers to a particular observation.

Another aspect of scientific knowledge, of the vision of the modern world, is that this knowledge is expressed in a mathematical formula. The great process through which the physical universe is made intelligible, knowable, is the equation. But mathematics is a discipline, a form of knowing which completely abstracts from ends. You do not demonstrate that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles because it is better that way, or because this is good for the triangle. Imagine the geometer who said that! Or again, take the line AC and cut it into two parts; the segment AB does not have any inclination, any order, any ordering to the segment BC; you can add, subtract, or divide, and all that is indifferent to the good of line AC. In itself, measurable quantity does not imply any finality. Therefore, if you represent the universe completely according to a mathematical scheme, finality must disappear.

In place of brute facts, positivism, and mathematical intelligibility, we need more finality, more respect for the interiority of finality. That is why the human sciences, which cannot, in spite of everything, completely ignore the end, replace finality with something else. But what, in the theories of certain philosophers, psychologists and sociologists, is the end be replaced by? By a species of power, by an efficacy, by a force or impulsion which is deployed and takes the place of that which we saw just before to be the intention of the end. Notice, for example, how Freud defines libido. What, at root, is libido? We could say, if we looked at it with an Aristotelian eye, that it is the search for, the intention for a certain kind of good, a certain kind of pleasure, a sensible and sensual good; however you express it, finally it is a search for some kind of good. Because of this, a certain force which seeks to obtain that good results. In contrast, according to Freud libido is simply an impulsion; moreover, even the word “impulsion” is a problem, because the “in” in impulsion implies a direction, an orientation. Rather, we should call it a pulsion, a push.

Thus, in modern science you have an extraordinarily multiplied and detailed knowledge of the facts and their mathematical relations. Modern science has discovered all sorts
of forces, which in fact do exist. But in the whole there is no meaning, no finality, no order, no ordering. And this cosmological vision has been transposed into the human sciences. We look at human behavior in sociology, economics, and politics as facts. We do not ask ourselves what, finally, is the role of human intention in all this? Why do men act this way? We verify and measure the givens, we make numerical correlations: we add up how many gallons of milk are consumed in Buenos-Aires each twenty-four hours, how many people go to Mass each week in Washington, how many cars a month are produced by the workers in Renault plants (I do not deny that it is important to know all this). And then, we establish mathematical relations, we calculate statistics (this also is interesting). I’m not saying that this isn’t useful. But we never get beyond these things, and as a result finality has completely disappeared from our view.

In order to comprehend the general problem of the ordering of man to an end, of his ordering to society and the ordering of society to the good of man, we must continue to deepen our insight into human activity and behavior, without denying the achievements of the human sciences, but also trying to rediscover, underneath the facts, the first truths proposed by Aristotle at the beginning of the Politics.
Chapter II

The Finality of Political Society

Let us now begin discussing the essential question raised at the beginning of Aristotle’s *Politics*. What kind of good do men seek in forming political societies and in coming together in societies. That is, what kind of good is political society ordered to? The knowledge of this good is of the first importance, not only for political science itself, but also for the government of society. If our rulers do not know why political society has come to be, what the man living in society is looking for at root, how can they govern well? Here again we are not concerned with prefabricated ideologies that descend ready made from heaven; We must question men and find what moves them.

**Happiness is the ultimate good**

First we should state that every human activity tends towards a good, both the activities through which man produces something exterior, such as making, transforming, and organizing, and his interior activities, such as choosing, and reflecting. Second, we should state that the goods pursued by men are arranged in a hierarchy. That is, some things we wish for the sake of others; medicine for health, and health for freedom of motion, and freedom of motion for the full enjoyment of life, etc. There is a hierarchy of goods, so that we wish such a good for such another good. But because we cannot regress into infinity, it is necessary that there be a good which we wish for its own sake. To love one thing for the sake of another, and this for the sake of another, and yet another, without end, would finally be senseless and lead to nothing.

There must be a supreme good, a good which we no longer wish for any other, but which we wish for its own sake. This would be the good for the sake of which all others are sought and to which all others are ordered. This good, which all men pursue and in some way are conscious of, is what all men call happiness.

Happiness is essentially the good beyond which we do not seek any other because it is totally sufficient. Everyone is unanimous, the whole world has an idea of a good that is total, final, complete, and beyond which we do not seek another good, and thus a good which in this sense is the supreme good. But what kind of good is supreme? In what does it consist? We all agree that we wish to be happy, that we search for happiness, but when we try to determine what happiness is, disagreement begins.

With respect to the nature of happiness, we discover that the first great distinction is between those whom Aristotle calls “men of the earth,” and those whom he calls “men of heaven.” For those of the earth, at least certain among them, happiness consists entirely in sensible pleasure; but if we listened to them, we would think that happiness is nothing above the pleasure of an animal, and thus there would not be a specifically human happiness. But even among the “men of the earth,” some place their happiness in goods that are in some way superior to the purely sensible goods, namely, in wealth, honor, glory, or power (to be the President of the United States), etc. Happiness would then be constituted by all these things. We know how entirely such men are deceived; if they were right, happiness would be just a heap, and it would produce only deception: wealth is unsatisfying, honors are also empty, because nothing is more fragile and unstable than human opinion. Glory disappears, power is precarious, etc.
Thus let us turn to “the men of Mount Olympus,” towards those for whom happiness is more heavenly. Among them we place, for example, Plato and even Kant, although in this heaven Kant might be a little ill at ease and awkward. For them, the supreme happiness above which there is no other is outside of this world; for Plato it is the Good in itself, for Kant the absolute and universal moral law. Unfortunately, such lofty goods are so distant from the ordinary man that by him they are not perceived as truly appealing, truly proportionate. These philosophies, whether they are moral or political, are philosophies of the good, of the good in itself, but they are not really philosophies of happiness. The first men of whom we have spoken, those who seek happiness in wealth, honor, power, etc., understand much better that happiness is for man; even if they are mistaken, they see better what happiness is. A Kantian does not really know what happiness is; he knows what the good is, what duty is, but not what happiness is, at least if he is truly a Kantian.

Thus it is necessary to take up our search again. The goods of this earth, wealth, glory, etc., are really ends, but they cannot be ultimate, they cannot constitute the ultimate happiness of man. The transcendent goods of Plato and Kant are undoubtedly ultimate and supreme, but they are not ends for man; he is not really ordered or proportionate to them. But happiness must be identified with the ultimate end of man, that is, the single thing which would not be desired for the sake of another thing, and towards which man finds himself interiorly drawn. This end would be also a good such that it would fully satisfy him by itself; in happiness, there must be nothing missing: this is the autonomy of happiness. Finally happiness must be a good in which we definitively fix our desire, a good which fulfills us in a stable way, indefectibly and with total security.

Now, let’s try to be even more precise in rebutting all of these hypotheses, all the points of view which we have recalled. Do we say, as many with Plato do, that happiness consists in a possession, the possession of this ultimate good? We could believe that: there is a certain aspect of happiness which implies a possession. But does the word ‘possession’ permit us to truly and essentially qualify happiness? No, because we can possess something and then sleep, we can be a possessor while sleeping, but the sleeping man is not in a state of happiness. Do we say then, with the Stoics for example, that happiness consists in mastery of self, the perfect possession of oneself? This also is neither fitting nor sufficient. Self-mastery is very good in its proper place, but man is not satisfied by this, it is not happiness. Do we say with yet others, that happiness would be autonomy, impassibility, an absence of desire, as certain forms of yoga or Buddhism or even Epicureanism think? But this would not be happiness either, because happiness implies an enjoyment of the good.

**Happiness is an activity**

Happiness consists of life in actuality. We can make this clear by an analogy: the happiness of a skier is descent, and the happiness of Louis Armstrong is playing the trumpet. That is, happiness consists in activity. But when we speak of human activity, we immediately find ourselves in the presence of many, various, and indefinite activities. Man can perform all sorts of activities: the activities of the shoemaker, of the professor, of the interpreter, of the pianist, etc. So in what kind of human activity does happiness consist? It’s necessary to read again here a very important and extremely relevant passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. 
“Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function (ergon) of man.” [It would be better to translate ergon as the activity, the work proper to man.]

“For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function.” [Thus for the flautist, the artisan, the skier, or the trumpeter, according to common opinion, it is in the exercise of their proper activity that the good resides. That is, it is in the playing of the flute or in the descent of the hill, that each, according to his activity, attains his end, his fullness in his proper work.]

“So would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he born without a function?” [Could it be possible that the activity of man consists simply in embracing diverse activities, each one having its own particular determination, its own proper justification, in relation to all of the various tasks, trades that man can exercise, and that he does not, insofar as he is a man, have a proper work?]

“Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a determinate function apart from all these?”

Thus it would be in the exercise of this determinate function of man as such that he would find his happiness.

It seems to me important to underline this point because today we think that the activity of man, the fullness of human development, would consist in the exercise of a multitude of particular activities. The man of tomorrow would be a cobbler in the morning, an organist at noon, and a professor at night. He would spend his life taking on as many particular functions and trades as possible. Could this constitute happiness? In fact this is a great illusion. Happiness is the activity of man insofar as he is man, and is not the sum of all activities possible to him. Consequently, we must still ask what kind of activity this is and in what it can consist.

Perhaps we can say that the specific activity of man is to deploy, in the diversity of the arts and sciences, the power of creation, the creative dynamism which is in him and which permits him to dominate nature. The activity of man as such would then essentially be that of *homo faber*, of the man who makes, who produces something. Such is the Marxist conception: man is above all the being who produces the means of his existence, and the good above all is that he can produce it through the development of his active and creative power. This idea is not only admitted by Marx and the Marxists, but by many others who identify man with his creative and productive activity.

It is true that this optimism, this exultation of man the creator and technician, has been questioned lately. We now wonder if this is really what fulfills man. When we have pushed yet further the creative development, when we have toured all the planets, revolutionized the power of managers, overthrown genetics, will we have found happiness? We can always go farther, but what happens afterwards? We enter the realm of the indefinite. We are lost in the interminable development of the arts and of technology, but we do not find a happiness in which we can be settled.
To see the deeper reason for this dissatisfaction, we need to consider that the technical activity of *homo faber*, whether we are dealing with the artisan or artist, the technician or the manufacturer, looks essentially toward what is beneath man, toward the work of production. What kind of success is envisioned by the artisan or technician, by anyone who makes any kind of artistic or technical work? He envisions the success of the work itself. The good of his activity is not in itself, but in his work. Man spends himself completely in this activity. This does not mean that he does not find a kind of fulfillment, a certain fullness; we do not deny that this would be a good, but we have to ask ourselves: is this the supreme good? Moreover, no matter how highly he develops the productions of his technology, in the activity of making man is always turned towards realities which are below him. All of his greatest achievements, missions to the Moon, management, artificial hearts, high-speed railways, all of this is magnificent, all of this is perfect in its own order, but it is always inferior to man. He cannot order his being to it, he cannot find his happiness and fulfillment in it. Production cannot offer to man an ultimate finality because when he produces, he comes out of himself without coming out of himself. He comes out of himself since he pours himself into his product, but he does not come out of himself because he always finds himself in the product. I am not saying that this would not be an element in the satisfaction and development of man, but how can this be the cause of his supreme good? To what would human nature thus ultimately be ordered? Is this that which would satisfy his twofold desire for nobility and interiority?

**Happiness is an activity according to reason**

Human nature is ordered to the most perfect fulfillment of man according to that which he is and which he alone possesses. What is specific in a being is that which is the best, most elevated in him. In man, this is intellect and reason: that is the summit of his being. Consequently, the best thing for him is to act according to reason. It is along these lines that we find the end for which he was made, the supreme goal of his life, otherwise known as happiness. Because, just as the carpenter has his proper function, and the potter his own as well, so also there exists one for man simply speaking, for man insofar as he is man. It is in acting well that he will reach his end.

The proper function of man is not found in the exercise of vegetative life, which he has in common with the plants, nor in the exercise of the sensible life, which he has in common with the animals. His proper function is an activity conformed to reason. Let us remind ourselves of a formula which St. Thomas often uses and borrows, not from Aristotle, but from the celebrated treatise *On the Divine Names*, originating in Alexandria: “The good of man is to be according to reason.” When we specify man by reason, we see what kind of perfection he is naturally ordered to. In the same way, when we specify the bird by wings, we see what kind of perfection the bird is naturally ordered to: flying.

Let us notice in passing that this way of seeing nature, nature as an interior ordering, as finality, so fundamental in political philosophy, has been completely submerged by the tide of nominalism and humanism. With Machiavelli, Hobbes and all their posterity, it has disappeared from the horizon of thought. Man has supposedly regained his rights, that is, he makes himself entirely actual. But if, as Rousseau wishes to think, each individual is in himself “entirely perfect and solitary,” he can only see society either as something exterior or as a whole in which he must let himself be absorbed.
But let us return to our subject: reason. We need to understand this word in the right way. In French, it gives us a little bit of trouble; it is even worse in Latin. But it is better in Greek: *logos*. Reason is what discerns, what establishes among beings, according to their diversity, their proportionate, intelligent and harmonious adaptation. That being said, let us recall that man can use his reason, either simply with a view to knowing the truth or with a view to directing his practical activity, to penetrating this activity and making it shine with the order and light of intellect. But what can the light of reason shine upon?

We incessantly seek to establish an order of reason in the world around us, and first in our exterior works, in language or dance, in the organization of railroads, in the administration of the State, etc. It is certain that man must create around himself a rational world, and done with a certain moderation, it is correct and even natural. But is that all that reason does?

Here is a text from Aristotle:

There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought.

Aristotle wants to say here that the rational part of the soul is either reason itself, the intellect which thinks, which reflects, which measures, etc., or those parts of the soul which, without being reason, are obedient to reason. “Obedient” is a rather bad translation; Aristotle writes “epipeithes,” “which allows itself to be persuaded by reason,” which is better than mere obedience.

Thus, there are in man, below reason, regions, layers which let themselves be penetrated by reason, which are capable of interiorizing exhortation or command. With these parts of the soul, reason does not proceed by imposing upon them an exterior submission, but it appeals to them interiorly by way of persuasion. What is it in man that can welcome this persuasion of reason? It is not the domain of vegetative life, for reason cannot penetrate it: how could reason persuade the stomach to digest? But between the domain of the vegetative and reason, there is the animal part of the soul, as we well know: the sensible appetite, seat of desire, anger, etc., above which are found the will and freedom. What kind of relation does reason have with these appetites? Most men think that there is only a relation of complete incomprehension, of conflict: reason can only dominate the unconscious, the libido, and all the forces which seek to exercise themselves, using an exterior constraint. All that the man whom we would call normal can arrive at would be a kind of equilibrium between these contraries.

For Aristotle this point of view corresponds to a truth. In fact, there often are conflicts between the concupiscible and irascible appetites and reason, serious conflicts. All the same, this does not represent the root of things; if this were fundamentally true, life for man would be unlivable. He could not support this tension without there being some harmony between the affective and the rational parts of his being. In reality, not only the will, but also the sensible appetites themselves are susceptible to allowing themselves to be tamed by reason in such a way that its rule is not simply an exterior constraint, but becomes something living and interior.

Then, if the good of man is to act according to reason, the most important point would not be to project reason upon the exterior world, but to bring it about that the forces of will,
freedom and affectivity inside of us participate interiorly in reason. What are we looking for, what is it that we love so much in music? It is precisely this living accord, this co-penetration of logos and the affective life. We have a great and constant need for this. It is not enough to silence the passions and emotions with an exterior repression; we have a need to be interiorly released, liberated from their heaviness and obscurity through their interior participation in logos. Finally, for man to live according to reason is the interiorization of the affective and voluntary life.

And all this concerns political society because it is in it that “to live according to reason” in the practical order can be fulfilled. For the political life is not a purely exterior business. It engages the life, the interior acts of man. The political life, as it manifests itself in civilization for example, is not only an order of reason poured out in the exterior works of man. But as manifested in monuments, language, manners, comportment, and human relations of all sorts, the political life makes us see, in a thousand inscrutable ways, this living infusion of harmonious reason in freedom and affectivity. In all this, reason does not destroy the affective life. On the contrary, it liberates it, releases it, elevates it. It makes it more perfectly itself.

Thus, to live according to reason is the perfection of man to which the social life itself is ordered. And all this, although it is not given by nature, is profoundly natural because the nature of man, at the root of his being, demands it.

Analysis of a text of St. Thomas

A passage from On Kingship by St. Thomas comments upon and develops the thought of Aristotle on the natural character of society for man; this text takes up again and orders three arguments that show that man is a naturally social and political animal.

First Argument: Yet it is natural for man, more than for any other animal, to be a social and political animal, Footnote to live in a group. This is clearly a necessity of man’s nature. For all other animals, nature has prepared food, hair as a covering, teeth, horns, claws as means of defense or at least speed in flight, while man alone was made without any natural provisions for these things. Instead of all these, man was endowed with reason, by the use of which he could procure all these things for himself by the work of his hands. Now, one man alone is not able to procure them all for himself, for one man could not sufficiently provide for life, unassisted. It is therefore natural that man should live in the society of many.

Second Argument: Moreover, all other animals are able to, discern, by inborn skill, what is useful and what is injurious, even as the sheep naturally regards the wolf as his enemy. Some animals also recognize by natural skill certain medicinal herbs and other things necessary for their life. Man, on the contrary, has a natural knowledge of the things which are essential for his life only in a general fashion, inasmuch as he is able to attain knowledge of the particular things necessary for human life by reasoning from natural principles. But it is not possible for one man to arrive at a knowledge of all these things by his own individual reason. It is therefore necessary for man to live in a multitude so that each one may assist his fellows, and different men may be occupied in seeking, by their
reason, to make different discoveries—one, for example, in medicine, one in this and another in that.

Third Argument: This point is further and most plainly evidenced by the fact that the use of speech is a prerogative proper to man. By this means, one man is able fully to express his conceptions to others. Other animals, it is true, express their feelings to one another in a general way, as a dog may express anger by barking and other animals give vent to other feelings in various fashions. But man communicates with his kind more completely than any other animal known to be gregarious, such as the crane, the ant or the bee.

We should notice a remarkable progression among these three arguments of St. Thomas. The first is the most exterior: because man possesses reason, he needs to make tools and instruments for procuring the necessities of life, and he must make them with the help of other men. The second is already more interior because it touches upon knowledge: men need to associate with each other and specialize in order to know what they must do.

We should reflect upon how St. Thomas expresses himself in the first two arguments. He says that man has a need to live in a multitude, to live in a society with a large number of other men. But how many is enough? He leaves it indeterminate, he does not mention a limitation. This suggests a multitude always more numerous, discoveries and elaborations always new: St. Thomas does not assign any ending point to this process. We might say that reason, in trying to break apart the limits in which nature has enclosed the other animals, launches man upon ways of life undefined, towards a horizon without limit.

Homer says, “I will sing of the man of a thousand turns,” of inexhaustible adventures and inventions. It is reason that, on the one hand, defines, proportions, and measures, and on the other hand, throws us into the indeterminate and unending. Indeed, after reason has said “one,” it adds “two,” and then “three,” and it cannot be stopped. Here, St. Thomas makes us think about the way in which Plato presents, in the Republic, the foundation of the city. These are the essential references for a political thought which wishes to study seriously the foundations of political life:

In my opinion, the City must find its birth in the weakness in which the individual finds himself, that he has a need for a thousand things that he cannot supply for himself. When a man takes a helper in view of one need, and another in view of another need, a multitude of needs brings together many men who associate in order to help each other. So doesn’t one man need to be a laborer, another a mason, still another a weaver?

But does this process have an end? We are thrown into the infinite, as we can see today, although in order to reassure ourselves we call it “progress.”

There is yet another thing which remains undetermined, hiding, in the first arguments of St. Thomas. All this cooperation which can thus go on to infinity does not yet make define for what kind of end men associate. It could well be an egotistical end: I associate with my baker in order to get bread and he, his shoes. We come together in society in order to satisfy our private interests. Thinking in this way we come upon an entirely modern man: Adam Smith, for example, the great prophet of the liberal economy whose idea would be
taken up by Hegel and applied by him to what we call “bourgeois society.” This idea is that in society individuals are seeking their particular interests without looking beyond them. We can add that the common order is established spontaneously, as happens on the level of atoms: each one pursues its own particular little dance, and an equilibrium of the whole is spontaneously established. It is necessary to recognize that this does correspond to a reality: it is true that men associate through their interest.

Thus, in the first two arguments, St. Thomas, in underlining the aspect of “multitude,” does not set aside the possibility of indefinite expansion; in underlining that we associate in order to find what we need, he does not exclude the possibility that we associate for private interest. Only, insofar as we remain on this level, we are only dealing with a conglomeration, the village or metropolis. We have not yet reached at the level of the city. We have reached the level of economics, but not yet of the politics.

It is the third argument of St. Thomas, an argument taken from the Politics of Aristotle, that, by introducing the ideas of the just and unjust, truly elevates us to the political plane. This argument is taken from language: man is naturally made to live in society because by nature he has words. But words permit men to share an account of justice. The supreme perfection of the life according to practical reason does not consist in ordering the production of the tools of existence. Reason demands more. It demands another order. Discerning the value of man, it sees that an order of men among themselves insofar as they are men is the best of human things.

This order is first the order of justice. And since language is the essential mediator in the communication of justice, nature, in giving him words, has made man – by far – the most perfectly communicative of animals. In order to comprehend the political nature of man and to follow it all the way to its end, we must thus leave aside the first argument, that of man the maker, and go all the way to the third, that of man the speaker. Insofar as we do not get there, we have not reached the top step of life according to reason, nor consequently the level of political life, strictly speaking.

Does not the history of the foundation of the city illustrate this progression? We see it at first united for production and exchange. And then one day, when things are ripe, along comes a man: Theseus, Romulus, Washington, who gives a form to the conglomeration by a constitution, that is, by relations of justice. Then, “Io polis,” “Oh, the city!” This is the cry of Oedipus coming to Athens in search of peace in his last days.

Analysis of a text of Marx

Let us read a parallel text of Marx, fundamental and well known:

We can distinguish men from animals by knowledge, by religion, or by anything that we like. But men began to distinguish themselves from the animals when they began to produce their own means of existence, not having them simply as a result of their physical organization.

And further:

Representation, thought, and intellectual exchange appears in man, here again, as a direct emanation of his material life.

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Marx clearly follows the first argument of St. Thomas.

Both begin from this fact: man produces the means of his existence. But a difference separates them with an exact and clarifying symmetry. St. Thomas immediately marks reason, the specifying property of man, as the reason why man is a social maker. But reason having been given, it leads to something more, as we can see from the argument concerning man the speaker, who develops his life and raises it up to the plane of sharing in justice. This constitutes another modality of social existence, another need of life according to reason, a higher modality of life than that comprised in the coordination of men making things, and thus, a modality which orders the life of the making man upon higher principles; these superior principles reach, in a definitive way, to the nature, function and finality of man insofar as he is man.

Among the two givens of experience, each equally immediate, equally present, which are that man produces and that man speaks, Marx definitively retains only the first. Moreover, he even prevents himself from seeking to know why man produces the means of his existence. For him, this is a item of evidence standing by itself, a first principle which should resolve all questions, and so should never pose any. He very much thinks that to take reason as the supreme marker and ruler of human life would be to subordinate man to values which are not totally immanent for him. Whoever says “reason” always also says, more or less, finality, the ideal, etc., things which always retain the indescribable flavor of something beyond this life. Thus, it is necessary to turn upside down whatever could even resemble what St. Thomas will say to us. Instead of searching within reason for the reason why man must produce his means of existence, he takes the necessity of productive activity as the reason why reason is so developed in man. Religious and economic ideologies are only superstructures. The infrastructure, the first principle from which everything emanates must be productive material activity. The independence and superiority that speaking man has over making man is only the alienation of the latter. Thus, it is necessary not so much to suppress speaking man, as to reduce him to making man. It is inseparably necessary to base the reason of speaking man in the activity of making man, in what constitutes his praxis. In sum, we must try to preserve reason, the defining characteristic of man, by dethroning it, by stripping it of its higher function of directing, a solution which would be the object of the revolutionary transformation of humanity. Unfortunately, the revolution risks trying to make this thing real before it has explained even once how it would be possible.

Happiness and political society

The true activity of man as such will truly correspond to the function of man as such – not only insofar as he is an artisan, architect, organist or professor, but insofar as he has been endowed with reason, and through this, oriented towards knowledge, love and communication – this true activity of man as such can only be turned towards realities which are equal or superior to himself, that is, specifically towards man or God. Man is distinguished from the plants and animals by using his intellect to act. We must seek the proper activity of man in that which characterizes and specifies his being: he is made to act as a rational being and to perform the actions of an intelligent being. But what are the ultimate terms of this kind of activity? It would not be to make the works of art or technology, as perfect as these might be. The supreme activity of man using his reason and intellect consists in this: to be turned towards the most noble and most elevated objects that he can attain to,
that he can be joined to. And what are such objects? Man can use his intellect and his will to join himself either to other men or to God.

This relation of man to God and to other men is made real through his intellect and will, and this is why it is truly human. We must search for his true function along these lines; this will be the true activity of man and consequently his true happiness. There are two great lines of activity, two finalities which stand out as the only ones through which man can truly find his happiness, that is, his good and his ultimate end: on the one hand, the knowledge of God and of things divine; on the other, in the order of practical life, communication with other men. This communication first happens in the exercise of justice, which already puts us in relations with other persons; but it is necessary to go farther, all the way to the friendship of which justice is the necessarily presupposed foundation. Friendship is that which, in the practical order of human life, truly constitutes the function of man, his most excellent function, that which can be his supreme activity, and thus his happiness.

Consequently, political society must promote and protect it as much as it can, because it cannot in itself bring about this double finality: knowledge for its own sake and friendship. Knowledge for its own sake is in the realm of the sciences. And to what does this knowledge in itself ultimately tend? To be joined, insofar as it is possible, to the summit of the intelligible realm, to the First Cause: God. Political society must sustain and promote, as much as it can, contemplative activity and the relation of the person to God. Contemplative life: this is not to say that the whole world should enter a monastery; but every man, at certain moments, does participate more or less in the contemplative life, in knowledge for its own sake, and it is the task of political society to favor these moments.

On the other hand, the end of civil society, in its most elevated and perfectly human aspect, essentially would be to sustain the exercise of the virtues of justice and friendship, and these in fact constitute the very life of political society. The end seen by political society is nothing other than the happiness of man. The end of political society and the end of man: they are one and the same end.

You will say to me: all this is very well, but divine contemplation and perfect friendship are inaccessible ideals! Of course. But if we pay attention, we will see that all men participate in the contemplative life to some degree, and that all men want to participate in it. Visiting museums to see the greatest works of art, contemplating nature, these are already beginnings of the contemplative life: man loves to contemplate. But society help this along, focus it on the most elevated objects, if possible God Himself. And in the case of friendship, we must not take the word “friendship” only in the sense of its highest examples, the greatest friendships, the perfection of the moral life that Aristotle describes in the eighth and ninth books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Friendship can be envisioned under very different formalities, beginning with the simplest, without which life in society would not be possible: there is always at least a little friendship in society; if there was never the least spontaneous movement towards the other – a gesture, a mark of attention – if no one said “good morning” or “thank you,” social life would completely unbearable and insupportable. It is the little things, which can be done all the time, which society must promote as much as possible. That does not deny that a political society in which friendship among men would be almost perfect and complete is perhaps an inaccessible ideal.
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In conclusion, I wish to underline again an important point. Everything that we have seen here, we have gone over a little too quickly, skipping many steps: there are many difficulties, many problems. I have simply wished to outline the progression, the general line of inquiry. You see, the end of man does not consist so much in making things, accomplishing things, or bringing things into reality, but in being joined to perfect beings, to that which is most perfect among beings, that is, to the person, whether we are concerned with the person of God or with other human persons. This is the activity *par excellence* that political society, the end of which is the happiness of man, ought to help him to find. Only, of course, this good is difficult to bring into reality.

The Ancients had a very noble and accurate conception of the true aim, of the eminent aim for which man was made and for which society was instituted. They kept their eyes fixed upon this ideal, an ideal in fact rarely attained, towards which human nature is really turned, but towards which it is necessary to keep it turned. What was remarkable to them and what we must never forget – missing this we completely falsify their political vision – is that, in seeing this ideal, they had an anxiety-ridden knowledge of human fragility. They knew how very noble and extraordinary the end of human nature was, but they also recognized the powerlessness of man for achieving it. Yet, a true politics must take as given these two aspect: on the one hand, that man is made for this very elevated end, his nature is carried to these perfect accomplishments which are contemplation of divine things and friendship with men; on the other hand, there is the weight of his weaknesses and incapacities. A politics which ignores the one or the other is not truly politics. It seems to me that today we have forgotten both of these. Man believes himself to be strong, capable of all progress, but he does not know where he is going, he no longer knows why he was made. However, there is in him as aspiration of nature, an ineradicable appeal to a fulfillment which is complete, to a true happiness and human fulfillment which he can only find in friendship and contemplation. Political society must favor these, it must help make these real.