

ST THOMAS AQUINAS
POLITICAL WRITINGS

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
R.W. DYSON



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Government and politics

(a) *Summa theologiae* Ia 96: Concerning the dominion which belonged to man in the state of innocence

articulus 3:¹ *Whether men were equal in the state of innocence*²

It seems that all men were equal in the state of innocence.

obiectio 1: For Gregory says: ‘Where we do not sin, we are all equal.’³ But in the state of innocence there was no sin. Therefore all were equal.

obiectio 2: Moreover, similarity and equality are the basis of mutual love, according to Ecclesiasticus 13:19: ‘Every beast loveth its like; so also every man him that is nearest to himself.’ Now in that state there was among men abundant love, which is the bond of peace. Therefore all were equal in the state of innocence.

obiectio 3: Moreover, when the cause ceases, the effect ceases also. But the inequality which now exists among men seems to arise, on the side of God, from the fact that He rewards some and punishes others; and, on the side of nature, from the fact that some are born weak and disadvantaged by some defect of nature, whereas others are strong and perfect. But this would not have been so in the primitive state.

sed contra: It is said at Romans 13:1 that the things which come from God are ordered. But order seems to consist especially in disparity; for Augustine says: ‘Order is the disposition of equal and unequal things in such a way as to give to each its proper place.’⁴ Therefore in the primitive

¹ This *quaestio* has four articles, the first two of which are: ‘Whether man in the state of innocence was lord of the animals’; and ‘Whether man was lord of all other creatures’.

² I.e. would all men have been equal had the Fall not occurred?

³ *Moralia* 21:15 (PL 76:203).

⁴ *De civitate Dei* 19:13.

state, in which everything was entirely proper, there would have been found disparity.

responsio: It is necessary to say that in the primitive state there would have been some disparity, at least as regards sex, because without diversity of sex there would be no generation; and similarly as regards age, for some would have been born of others; nor were those who mated sterile. Moreover, as regards the soul, there would have been diversity in the matter of righteousness and knowledge. For man worked not of necessity, but by the free will which equips the man who has it to apply his mind either more or less to the doing or willing or understanding of something. Hence some would have become more proficient in righteousness and knowledge than others.

There might have been bodily disparity also. For the human body was not so totally exempt from the laws of nature as not to receive from external sources varying degrees of advantage and help; for its life also was sustained by food. And so nothing prevents us from saying that, according to the different dispositions of the air and the different positions of the stars, some would have been born more robust in body than others, and greater and more beautiful and more fair; although even in those who were surpassed in these respects, there would have been no defect or sin either in soul or body.

ad 1: By these words Gregory intends to exclude the disparity which exists as between righteousness and sin from which it comes about that some persons are made subject to the coercion of others as a punishment.⁵

ad 2: Equality is the cause of equality in mutual love. Yet there can be greater love between unequals than between equals, even if not an equal reciprocation. For a father naturally loves his son more than a brother loves his brother, although the son does not love his father as much as he is loved by him.

ad 3: The cause of disparity could lie on the side of God [even in the state of innocence]: not, indeed, because He would punish some and reward others, but because He might exalt some above others, so that the beauty of order might shine forth all the more brightly among men. Disparity might arise also on the side of nature in the manner

⁵I.e. he does not mean to say that where there is no sin there is no inequality, but that such inequality as there is is not penal.

described in the body of the article, without there being any defect of nature.

articulus 4: *Whether in the state of innocence man would have had
dominion over man*

It seems that in the state of innocence man would not have had dominion over man.

obiectio 1: For Augustine says at *De civitate Dei* 19: ‘God did not intend that His rational creature, made in His own image, should have lordship over any but irrational creatures: not man over man, but man over the beasts.’⁶

obiectio 2: Moreover, that which was introduced as a punishment for sin would not have existed in the state of innocence. But the fact that man is subject to man was introduced as a punishment for sin. For after sin it was said to the woman (Genesis 3:16): ‘Thou shalt be under thy husband’s power.’ Therefore in the state of innocence man would not have been subject to man.

obiectio 3: Moreover, subjection is opposed to liberty. But liberty is one of the foremost blessings, and would not have been lacking in the state of innocence, where, as Augustine says at *De civitate Dei* 14, ‘nothing was absent that a good will might seek’.⁷ Therefore man would not have had dominion over man in the state of innocence.

sed contra: The condition of man in the state of innocence was not more exalted than the condition of the angels. But among the angels some have dominion over others, and so one order is called ‘Dominations’.⁸ Therefore it was not contrary to the dignity of the state of innocence that one man should be ruled by another.

responsio: ‘Dominion’ is understood in two ways. In one way, it is contrasted with servitude; and so a master [*dominus*] in this sense is one to whom someone is subject as a slave. In another way, dominion is understood as referring in a general way to [the rule of] any kind of subject

⁶ *De civitate Dei* 19:15.

⁷ *De civitate Dei* 14:10.

⁸ Cf. Colossians 1:16; Ephesians 1:21. The earliest and most influential Christian treatise on the ‘orders’ of the angels is Ps.-Dionysius, *De caelesti hierarchia* (PG 3; and see *Pseudo Dionysius: the Complete Works*, ed. and trans. C. Luibheid et al. (New York, 1987)). For St Thomas’s discussion of the angelic orders see Ia 108:6.

whatsoever; and in this sense even he who has the office of governing and directing free men can be called a master. In the first sense, therefore, one man could not have had dominion over other men in the state of innocence; but, in the second sense, one man could have had dominion over others even in the state of innocence. The reason for this is that a slave differs from a free man in that the latter ‘exists for his own sake’, as is said at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, whereas a slave is subordinated to another.⁹ One man is therefore the master of another as his slave when he treats the one whose master he is as a means to his own – that is, to the master’s – advantage. And since every man’s proper good is desirable to himself, and, consequently, it is a sorrowful thing to anyone to cede to another a good which ought to be his own, therefore such dominion cannot exist without pain on the part of the subject; and so such dominion could not have existed in the state of innocence as between one man and another.

On the other hand, one man is the master of another as a free subject when he directs him either towards his own good, or towards the common good. And such dominion would have existed in the state of innocence between man and man, for two reasons. First, because man is by nature a social animal,¹⁰ and so in the state of innocence would have lived a social life. But there cannot be social life among a multitude of people save under the direction of someone who is to look to the common good; for many, as such, seek many things, whereas one attends only to one. And so the Philosopher says at the beginning of the *Politics* that wherever many things are directed to one end, there is always found one at the head, directing them.¹¹ Second, if one man were pre-eminent over all the others in knowledge and righteousness, it would be inconsistent [with the idea of moral pre-eminence] for such pre-eminence not to be directed to the benefit of others, according to 1 Peter 4:10: ‘As every man hath received grace, ministering the same one to another.’ Hence Augustine says at *De civitate Dei* 19: ‘For it is not out of any desire for mastery that just men command; rather they do so from a dutiful concern for others’;¹² and: ‘This is prescribed by the order of nature: it is thus that God created man.’¹³

By this are shown the replies to all the *obiectiones* which proceeded from the first mode of dominion.

⁹ *Metaphysics* 1:2 (982b26).

¹⁰ See n. 17, below.

¹¹ *Politics* 1:5 (1254a28).

¹² *De civitate Dei* 19:14.

¹³ *De civitate Dei* 19:15.

De regimine principum

(b) *The treatise ‘De regimine principum’ or ‘De regno’*¹⁴

Preface

*The author sets forth his intention in writing to the king of Cyprus*¹⁵ As I considered with myself what I should undertake that would be worthy of royal majesty and in keeping with my calling and office, it occurred to me that what I might offer a king above all would be a book written on the subject of kingship, in which I should, to the best of my powers, diligently draw out both the origin of a kingdom and what pertains to the king’s office, according to the authority of Divine scripture, the teachings of the philosophers, and the examples given by those who praise princes, relying for the beginning, progression and completion of the work upon the aid of Him Who is King of kings and Lord of lords, by Whom kings reign: the Lord, ‘a great God, and a great King above all gods’ (Psalm 95:3).

Book 1

Chapter 1: That it is necessary for men who live together to be subject to diligent rule by someone To fulfil this intention, we must begin by explaining how the title ‘king’ is to be understood. Now in all cases where things are directed towards some end but it is possible to proceed in more than one way, it is necessary for there to be some guiding principle, so that the due end may be properly achieved. For example, a ship is driven in different directions according to the force of different winds, and it will not reach its final destination except by the industry of the steersman who guides it into port. Now man has a certain end towards which the whole of his life and activity is directed; for as a creature who acts by intelligence, it is clearly his nature to work towards some end.¹⁶ But men can proceed towards that end in different ways, as the very diversity of human efforts and activities shows. Man therefore needs something to guide him towards his end.

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

¹⁴ See Introduction, p. xix.

¹⁵ The chapter headings which appear in this treatise are the additions of a later editor.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Ethics* 1:7 (1098a5).

political animal, who lives in a community [*in multitudine vivens*]:¹⁷ more so, indeed, than all other animals; and natural necessity shows why this is so. For other animals are furnished by nature with food, with a covering of hair, and with the means of defence, such as teeth, horns or at any rate speed in flight. But man is supplied with none of these things by nature. Rather, in place of all of them reason was given to him, by which he might be able to provide all things for himself, by the work of his own hands.¹⁸ One man, however, is not able to equip himself with all these things, for one man cannot live a self-sufficient life. It is therefore natural for man to live in fellowship with many others.

Moreover, other animals are endowed with a natural awareness of everything which is useful or harmful to them. For example, the sheep naturally judges the wolf to be an enemy. Some animals even have a natural awareness which enables them to recognise certain medicinal plants and other things as being necessary to their lives. Man, however, has a natural understanding of the things necessary to his life only in a general way, and it is by the use of reason that he passes from universal principles to an understanding of the particular things which are necessary to human life. But it is not possible for one man to apprehend all such things by reason. It is therefore necessary for man to live in a community, so that each man may devote his reason to some particular branch of learning: one to medicine, another to something else, another to something else again. And this is shown especially by the fact that only man has the capacity to use speech, by means of which one man can reveal the whole content of his mind to another.¹⁹ Other animals express their feelings to each other in a general way, as when a dog shows his anger by barking and the other animals show their feelings in various ways; but one man is more able to communicate with another than any other animal is, even those which are seen to be gregarious, such as cranes, ants and bees.²⁰ Solomon, therefore, is thinking of this at Ecclesiastes 4:9 where he says: 'Two are better than one, because they have the reward of mutual companionship.'

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Politics* 1:2 (1253a2). St Thomas's 'man is by nature a social and political animal' – *Naturale autem est homini ut sit animal sociale et politicum* – is taken from William of Moerbeke's Latin translation of the *Politics*. On the whole it conveys the meaning of Aristotle's ὁ ἐνθροπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον better than the literal translation 'political animal' would. See also p. 9, below. 'Community' is probably as close as one can get to what St Thomas usually means by *multitudo*.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *De partibus animalium* 4:10 (687a19).

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Politics* 1:2 (1253a1).

²⁰ Aristotle, *Historia animalium* 1:1 (488a10).

De regimine principum

If, therefore, it is natural for man to live in fellowship with many others, it is necessary for there to be some means whereby such a community of men may be ruled. For if many men were to live together with each providing only what is convenient for himself, the community would break up into its various parts unless one of them had responsibility for the good of the community as a whole, just as the body of a man and of any other animal would fall apart if there were not some general ruling force to sustain the body and secure the common good of all its parts. Solomon is thinking of this at Proverbs 11:14 where he says: 'Where there is no governor, the people shall be scattered.' This accords with reason; for individual interests and the common good are not the same. Individuals differ as to their private interests, but are united with respect to the common good, and such differences have various causes. It is fitting, therefore, that, beyond that which moves the individual to pursue a good peculiar to himself, there should be something which promotes the common good of the many. It is for this reason that wherever things are organised into a unity, something is found that rules all the rest.²¹ For by a certain order of Divine providence all bodies in the material universe are ruled by the primary, that is, the celestial, body, and all bodies by rational creatures.²² Also, in one man the soul rules the body, and, within the soul, the irascible and concupiscible appetites are ruled by the reason.²³ Again, among the

²¹ Aristotle, *Politics* 1:5 (1254a28).

²² For St Thomas's cosmology see *SCG* 3:23; for the main classical origin of this cosmology see Aristotle, *De caelo* 1–2 *passim*. See also *SCG* 3:78.

²³ For St Thomas's explanation of this terminology, which the reader will encounter several times, see e.g. Ia 80:1–2; 81:1–3; IaIIae 9:2; 17:2. Scholastic psychology posits three parts of the soul: appetite, reason, and will. The soul is correctly ordered when reason controls the appetite and commands the will. The idea is, of course, in essence the same as the account of individual justice given by Plato at *Republic* 434D–449A. 'Appetite' is the name given by St Thomas to all strivings or drives, or (to give *appetitus* its literal meaning) all 'seekings' after something. Appetites can be conscious or unconscious, intellectual or sensitive. 'Sensitive' appetites – i.e. appetites arising from sensation – tend towards particular objects desired by the senses. They are 'concupiscible' insofar as they are directed towards a sensible good or strive to avoid a sensible evil; they are 'irascible' if the striving encounters an obstacle to be overcome. Concupiscible appetites include such things as love, hate, desire, aversion, joy and grief; irascible appetites such things as hope, despair, fear and anger. The movements of the appetites are the cause of emotions. 'Intellectual' or 'rational' appetite is the same thing as will. It differs from the sensitive appetite because it tends of itself towards the good as such, and therefore necessarily towards God as the Supreme Good. Sin occurs when an 'object moves the sensitive appetite, and the sensitive appetite inclines the reason and will' (IaIIae 85:1). At Ia 81:2 the terms 'concupiscible' and 'irascible' are attributed to Nemesis (*De natura hominis* 16; 17 (*PL* 40:672; 676)) and Damascene (*De fide orthodoxa* 2:12 (*PG* 94:928)). There is a useful synopsis at *NCE* 1, s.v. 'Appetite'. See also E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas*, pt II, ch. 8.

members of the body there is one ruling part, either the heart or the head, which moves all the others.²⁴ It is fitting, therefore, that in every multitude there should be some ruling principle.²⁵

Chapter II: The various forms of lordship or government But where matters are directed towards some end, there may be one way of proceeding which is right and another which not right; and so we find that the government of a community can be directed both rightly and not rightly.²⁶ Now something is directed rightly when it is led to its proper end, and not rightly when it is led to an end which is not proper to it. But the end proper to a community of free men is different from that of slaves. For a free man is one who is the master of his own actions, whereas a slave, insofar as he is a slave, is the property of another.²⁷ If, therefore, a community of free men is ordered by a ruler in such a way as to secure the common good, such rule will be right and just inasmuch as it is suitable to free men. If, however, the government is directed not towards the common good but towards the private good of the ruler, rule of this kind will be unjust and perverted;²⁸ and such rulers are warned by the Lord at Ezekiel 34:2, where He says: 'Woe be to the shepherds that do feed themselves' – because they seek only gain for themselves. 'Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?' Shepherds must seek the good of their flock, and all rulers the good of the community subject to them.

If, therefore, government is exercised unjustly by one man alone, who, in ruling, seeks gain for himself and not the good of the community subject to him, such a ruler is called a tyrant, a name derived from [the Greek word *τυραννίς*, which means] 'force', because he oppresses with power, and does not rule with justice.²⁹ Hence, among the ancients all men of power were called 'tyrants'.³⁰ If, however, unjust government is exercised not by one but by several, when this is done by a few it is called 'oligarchy', that is, 'rule by the few'; and this comes about when, by reason of their wealth, the few oppress the people, and it differs from tyranny only with respect

²⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 5:1 (1013a5).

²⁵ Cf. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus* 5:2.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Politics* 3:6 (1279a17).

²⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1:2 (982b25).

²⁸ Aristotle, *Politics* 3:7 (1279a22); *Ethics* 8:10 (1159b31).

²⁹ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* 9:3 (*PL* 82:344); although, like so many medieval etymologies, this one is not correct.

³⁰ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 5:19.

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to number. Again, if wrongful government is exercised by the many, this is named ‘democracy’, that is, ‘rule by the people’; and this comes about when the common people oppress the rich by force of numbers. In this way the whole people will be like a single tyrant.

Similarly, it is proper to distinguish the various kinds of just government. For if the administration is in the hands of a certain section of the community [*aliquam multitudinem*], as when the military class [*multitudo bellatorum*] governs a city or province, this is commonly called polity.³¹ If, again, administration is in the hands of a few but virtuous men, rule of this kind is called aristocracy: that is, ‘the best rule’, or ‘rule of the best men’ [*optimorum*], who for this reason are called aristocrats [*optimates*]. And if just government belongs to one man alone, he is properly called a king. Hence the Lord, at Ezekiel 37:24, says: ‘And David my servant shall be king over them, and they all shall have one shepherd.’ It is clearly shown by this verse that it is the nature of kingship that there should be one who rules, and that he should be a shepherd who seeks the common good and not his own gain.³²

Now since it is fitting for man to live in a community because he would not be able to provide all the necessities of life for himself were he to remain alone, it must be that a society of many men will be perfect to the extent that it is self-sufficient in the necessities of life. The self-sufficient life is certainly present to some extent in the family of one household, with respect, that is, to the natural activities of nourishment and the procreation of children and other things of this kind; and one locality may be sufficient in all those things belonging to a particular trade; and a city, which is a perfect [i.e. a complete] community, is sufficient in all the necessities of life.³³

³¹ This sentence does not lend itself to exact translation. In the context, I cannot see what *aliquam multitudinem*, ‘a certain multitude’, can mean other than ‘a section of the community’. ‘The military class’ is a pretty free translation of *multitudo bellatorum*, but I could not think of a better way of conveying what St Thomas seems to mean. Aristotle’s use of the word ‘polity’ is ambiguous, and Aquinas has inherited this ambiguity with the term. Aristotle’s chief meaning seems to be rule by a fairly numerous middle class, because he thinks that a constitution midway between rule by the few and rule by the many will be most stable (cf. *Politics* 3:7 (1279a37); 4:8 (1293b33); 4:11 (1295a31)). St Thomas here seems to be remembering the passage at *Politics* 3:7 (1279b1), where Aristotle says that the shared excellence of good government by the many is likely to be military and that the franchise will be related to the bearing of arms. One cannot help feeling that St Thomas has rather missed the point. But he refers to polity again at the beginning of ch. iv, as the good form of rule by the many.

³² The threefold classification of good and bad constitutional forms given here and in the preceding paragraph is derived from Aristotle’s *Politics* 3:7 (1279a25).

³³ Aristotle, *Politics* 1:2 (1252b9).

But this is all the more true of a single province, because of the need for common defence and mutual assistance against enemies.³⁴ Hence, he who rules a perfect community, that is, a city or province, is properly called a king; but he who rules a household is not a king, but the father of a family. He does, however, bear a certain resemblance to a king, and for this reason kings are sometimes called the ‘fathers’ of their people.

From what we have said, therefore, it is clear that a king is one who rules over the community of a city or province, and for the common good. Hence Solomon, at Ecclesiastes 5:8, says: ‘The king commands all the lands subject to him.’

Chapter III: That it is more beneficial for a community of men living together to be ruled by one than by many Having said these things, we must next ask whether it is more suitable for a province or city to be ruled by many or by one. This can be answered by considering the end of government itself. For it must be the task of anyone who exercises rule to secure the wellbeing of whatever it is that he rules. For example, it is the task of the steersman to preserve the ship from the perils of the sea and to guide it into a safe harbour. But the good and wellbeing of a community united in fellowship lies in the preservation of its unity. This is called peace,³⁵ and when it is removed and the community is divided against itself, social life loses its advantage and instead becomes a burden. It is for this end, therefore, that the ruler of a community ought especially to strive: to procure the unity of peace. Nor may he rightly wonder whether he ought to bring about peace in the community subject to him, any more than the physician should wonder whether he ought to heal the sick entrusted to him: for no one ought to deliberate about an end for which he must strive, but only about the means to that end.³⁶ Thus the Apostle, commending the unity of the faithful people, says at Ephesians 4:3: ‘Be ye solicitous for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’ The more effectively government preserves the unity of peace, therefore, the more beneficial it is; for we call something ‘more beneficial’ when it leads more effectively to its end. Clearly, however, something which is itself one can bring about unity more effectively than something which is many can, just as the most

³⁴ This sentence is, of course, St Thomas’s gloss on Aristotle, made as a concession to the fact that he is talking about medieval kingdoms rather than Greek city-states.

³⁵ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 19:13.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Ethics* 3:3 (1112b13).

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effective cause of heat is that which is itself hot.³⁷ Government by one is therefore more advantageous than government by several.

Moreover, it is clear that a plurality of rulers will in no way preserve a community if they are wholly at odds with one another. Some kind of unity is required as between a plurality of individuals if they are to govern anything whatsoever, just as a group of men in a boat cannot pull together as one unit unless they are in some measure united.³⁸ But a plurality is said to be united to the degree that it approaches to one. It is therefore better for one to rule than many, who only approach to one.

Again, those things are best which are most natural, for in every case nature operates for the best; and in nature government is always by one. Among the multitude of the body's members there is one part which moves all the others, namely, the heart; and among the parts of the soul there is one force, namely the reason, which chiefly rules; also, there is one king of the bees,³⁹ and in the whole universe one God is the Maker and Ruler of all. And this accords with reason, for every multitude is derived from unity. Thus, if those things which come about through art do so by imitation of those which exist in nature, and if a work of art is better to the degree that it achieves a likeness to what is in nature,⁴⁰ it is necessarily true in the case of human affairs that that community is best which is ruled by one.

This appears also to be borne out by experience. For provinces or cities which are not ruled by one man toil under dissensions and are tossed about without peace, so that the complaint which the Lord made through the prophet (Jeremiah 12:10) may be seen to be fulfilled: 'Many pastors have destroyed my vineyard.' By contrast, provinces and cities governed by a single king rejoice in peace, flourish in justice and are gladdened by an abundance of things. Hence the Lord promises His people through the prophets that, as a great gift, He will put them under one head and that there will be one prince in the midst of them.⁴¹

Chapter IV: That just as the rule of one is the best when it is just, so its opposite is the worst; and this is proved by many reasons and arguments But just as the rule of a king is the best, so the rule of a tyrant is the worst. Now

³⁷ Cf. *SCG* 4:76:4; *Summa theologiae* Ia 103:3.

³⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 3:4 (1276b20).

³⁹ Aristotle, *Historia animalium* 5:21 (553b6).

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Physics* 2:2 (194a21).

⁴¹ Cf. Jeremiah 30:21; Ezekiel 34:23; 37:25.

democracy is the opposite of polity, since, as is apparent from what has been said, rule is in each case exercised by the many;⁴² and oligarchy is the opposite of aristocracy, since in each case it is exercised by the few; and tyranny of kingship, since in each case it is exercised by one. But it has been shown already that kingship is the best form of government.⁴³ If, therefore, that which is the opposite of the best is the worst, tyranny is necessarily the worst.⁴⁴

Again, a power which is united is more efficient at bringing about its purposes than one which is dispersed or divided. For many men united at the same time can pull what no one of them would be able to pull if the group were divided into its individual parts. Therefore, just as it is more beneficial for a power which produces good to be more united, because in this way it is able to produce more good, so is it more harmful for a power which produces evil to be united than divided. But the power of an unjust ruler produces evil for the community inasmuch as it replaces the good of the community with a good peculiar to himself. Therefore, just as, in the case of good government, rule is more beneficial to the extent that the ruling power is more nearly one, so that kingship is better than aristocracy and aristocracy than polity; so the converse will be true in the case of unjust rule: that is, it will be more harmful to the extent that the ruling power is more nearly one. Tyranny is therefore more harmful than oligarchy and oligarchy than democracy.

Again, what renders government unjust is the fact that the private good of the ruler is sought at the expense of the good of the community. The further it departs from the common good, therefore, the more unjust will the government be. But there is a greater departure from the common good in an oligarchy, where the good of the few is sought, than in a democracy, where the good of the many is sought; and there is a still greater departure from the common good in a tyranny, where the good of only one is sought. A large number comes closer to the whole than a small one, and a small one closer than only one. Tyranny, therefore, is the most unjust form of government.

The same thing becomes clear from a consideration of the order of Divine providence, which disposes all things for the best. For goodness arises in things from one perfect cause, as from the working together of everything that can assist in the production of good; whereas evil arises

⁴² Ch. II; and see n. 31.

⁴³ Ch. III.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Ethics* 8:10 (1160b9).

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singly, from individual defects.⁴⁵ For there is no beauty in a body unless all its members are properly disposed, and ugliness arises when even one member is improperly so. And so ugliness arises for many reasons and from a variety of causes, whereas beauty does so in one way and from one perfect cause; and this is true in all cases of good and evil, as if it were by the providence of God that good should be the stronger because coming from a single cause, while evil should be the weaker because coming from many. It is fitting, therefore, that just government should be exercised by one man alone, so that it may for this reason be stronger. But if the government should fall away into injustice, it is more fitting that it should belong to many so that it may be weaker, and so that they may hinder one another. Among the forms of unjust rule, therefore, democracy is the most tolerable and tyranny is the worst.

The same conclusion is especially apparent if one considers the evils which arise from tyranny. For when the tyrant, despising the common good, seeks his own private good, the consequence is that he oppresses his subjects in a variety of ways, according to the different passions to which he is subject as he tries to secure whatever goods he desires. For one who is in the grip of the passion of greed will seize the property of his subjects; hence Solomon says at Proverbs 29:4: 'The just king makes rich the earth, but the greedy man destroys it.' If he is subject to the passion of wrath, he will shed blood for no reason; hence it is said at Ezekiel 22:27: 'Her princes in the midst thereof are like wolves ravening their prey, to shed blood.' The wise man admonishes us that such rule is to be shunned, saying (Ecclesiasticus 9:13), 'Keep thee far from the man that hath power to kill': that is, because he kills not for the sake of justice, but through power and from the lust of his own will. There will, therefore, be no security, but all things uncertain, when the law is forsaken; nor will it be possible for any trust to be placed in that which depends upon the will, not to say the lust, of another. Nor does such rule oppress its subjects in bodily matters only, but it impedes them with respect to their spiritual goods also; for those who desire to rule their subjects rather than benefit them put every obstacle in the way of their progress, being suspicious of any excellence in their subjects that might threaten their own wicked rule. Tyrants 'suspect good men rather than bad, and are always afraid of another's virtue'.⁴⁶ Tyrants therefore endeavour to

⁴⁵ Romans 8:28; Ps.-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 4:30 (PG 3:729).

⁴⁶ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* 7:2.

prevent their subjects from becoming virtuous and increasing in nobility of spirit, lest they refuse to bear their unjust dominion. They prevent the bond of friendship from becoming established among their subjects, and hinder them from enjoying the rewards of mutual peace, so that, for as long as they do not trust one another, they will not be able to unite against a tyrant's rule. For this reason, tyrants sow discord among their subjects, nourish strife, and prohibit those things which create fellowship among men, such as wedding-feasts and banquets and other such things by which familiarity and trust are usually produced among men.⁴⁷ They also endeavour to prevent anyone from becoming powerful or rich, because, suspecting their subjects according to their own evil conscience, they fear that, just as they themselves use power and riches to do harm, so the power and wealth of their subjects will be used to do harm to them in return. Hence Job (15:21) says this of the tyrant: 'The sound of dread is ever in his ears, and even when there is peace' – that is, even when no ill is intended towards him – 'he is ever suspicious of treacheries'. For this reason, then, when rulers who ought to cultivate the virtues in their subjects look upon their subjects' virtues with wretched envy and do everything in their power to impede them, few virtuous men will be found under a tyrant. For according to what the Philosopher says, brave men are found among those who honour the bravest;⁴⁸ and, as Cicero says, 'Things which are despised by everyone always fail and have little strength.'⁴⁹

It is, indeed, natural that men who are nourished in a climate of fear should degenerate into a servile condition of soul and become fearful of every manly and strenuous act. This is shown by the experience of those provinces which have remained long under a tyrant. Hence the Apostle says at Colossians 3:21: 'Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.' And Solomon is thinking of these harmful effects of tyranny when he says (Proverbs 28:12): 'When the wicked reign, men are ruined': because, that is, subjects fall away from the perfection of virtue through the wickedness of tyrants. And he goes on to say (29:2): 'When the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn'; and again (28:28): 'When the wicked rise, men hide themselves' in order to escape the cruelty of tyrants. And no wonder; for a man who rules without reason according to the lusts of his own soul is no different from a beast. Hence Solomon says (Proverbs 28:15): 'As a roaring lion and a hungry bear, so is a wicked ruler over the

⁴⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 5:11 (1313a39).

⁴⁸ *Ethics* 1:3 (1095b28); 3:8 (1116a20).

⁴⁹ *Tusculanae disputationes* 1:2:4.

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poor people.’ And so it is that men remove themselves from a tyrant as from cruel beasts, and to be subject to a tyrant seems the same as to be mauled by a ferocious animal.

Chapter v: How varied the forms of government were among the Romans; and that their commonwealth sometimes prospered under the government of many Because both the best and the worst can occur in a monarchy – that is, under government by one – the evil of tyranny has rendered the dignity of kingship odious to many. For sometimes those who desire to be ruled by a king fall victim instead to the savagery of tyrants, and a great many rulers have exerted tyrannical sway under the pretext of royal dignity. Clear examples of this appear in the case of the Roman commonwealth. For the kings were expelled by the Roman people when they could no longer bear the burden of their rule, or, rather, of their tyranny. They then instituted for themselves consuls and other magistrates by whom they commenced to be ruled and guided, wishing to exchange kingship for aristocracy; and, as Sallust remarks, ‘It is incredible to recall how swiftly the city of Rome grew once she had achieved her liberty.’⁵⁰ For it often happens that men living under a king are reluctant to exert themselves for the common good, no doubt supposing that whatever they do for the common good will not benefit them but someone else who is seen to have the goods of the community under his own power. But if no one person is seen to have such power, they no longer regard the common good as if it belonged to someone else, but each now regards it as his own. Experience therefore seems to show that a single city governed by rulers who hold office for one year only can sometimes accomplish more than a king can even if he has three or four cities, and that small services exacted by kings bear more heavily than great burdens imposed [on itself] by a community of citizens. This principle was exemplified during the emergence of the Roman commonwealth; for the common people were enlisted into the army and paid wages for military service, and when the common treasury was not sufficient to pay the wages, private wealth was put to public use to such an extent that not even the senators retained anything made of gold for themselves apart from one gold ring and one seal each, which were the insignia of their rank.⁵¹ Presently, however, the Romans became exhausted by the continual quarrels which eventually grew into civil wars, and the liberty which they had so striven to attain was then snatched from

⁵⁰ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* 7:3; cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 5:12.

⁵¹ Livy 36; cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 3:19.

their hands by those civil wars, and they began to be under the power of the emperors: who at first would not allow themselves to be called kings, because the name of king was odious to the Romans. Some of these emperors faithfully pursued the common good, as kings should, and the Roman commonwealth was increased and preserved by their efforts. Most of them, however, were tyrants to their subjects and weak and ineffective in the face of their enemies, and these brought the Roman commonwealth to naught.

A similar process occurred in the case of the people of the Hebrews. At first, while they were ruled by judges they were plundered on all sides by their enemies, for each man did only what was good in his own eyes. Then, at their own request, kings were divinely given to them;⁵² but because of the wickedness of the kings they fell away from the worship of the one God and finally were led away into captivity. Peril lurks on either side, therefore: either the best form of government, kingship, may be shunned because tyranny is feared, or, if the risk is considered worthwhile, royal power may change into a wicked tyranny.

Chapter vi: That tyrannical government more often arises from the rule of many than from that of one; and so government by one is better Now when it is necessary to choose between two alternatives both of which involve danger, one should certainly choose that which is accompanied by the lesser danger. But if monarchy is changed into tyranny, less evil flows from this [process of change] than when the government of a number of the best men becomes corrupt. For the dissension which often follows government by several persons is contrary to the good of peace, which is the foremost goal of any social community; but this is a good which is not taken away by tyranny, for the tyrant only takes away some of the goods of individual men – unless the tyranny is so excessive that it ravages the whole community. The rule of one is therefore to be preferred to that of many, though perils flow from each.

Again, it seems clear that we ought to avoid that alternative from which great danger is more likely to follow. But the greatest dangers to a community more often follow from the rule of many than from the rule of one. For where there are many it is likelier that one of them will fail to be concerned with the common good than where there is only one. And whenever one out of a number of governors ceases to labour for the common good, there arises a danger of dissension in the community of their subjects; for where

⁵² Judges 2 *passim*; 1 Samuel 12:13f.

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there is dissension among princes, a consequence of this is that dissension in the community may ensue. If, however, one man rules, he will more often attend to the common good, or, if he turns aside from the task of securing the common good, it does not immediately follow that he will set about oppressing his subjects and become an extreme tyrant, which, as we have shown above,⁵³ is the worst kind of bad government. The perils which arise out of government by many are therefore more to be avoided than those which arise out of government by one.

Again, the rule of many turns into tyranny more rather than less frequently than that of one. For when dissension arises under the rule of several persons, it often happens that one man rises superior to the others and usurps to himself sole dominion over the community. This can plainly be seen to have happened from time to time, for in almost every case government by many has ended in tyranny; and this appears very clearly in the example of the Roman commonwealth. For when it had long been administered by several magistrates, there arose plots, dissensions and civil wars, and it fell victim to the most cruel tyrants. Indeed, if one gives diligent attention both to what has been done in the past and to what is being done now, it will be found universally that tyranny has been exercised more often in lands governed by many than in those governed by one.⁵⁴ If, therefore, kingship, which is the best form of government, seems to be worthy of avoidance mainly because of the danger of tyranny, and if tyranny tends to arise not less but more often under the government of several, the straightforward conclusion remains that it is more advantageous to live under one king than under the rule of several persons.

Chapter VII: The conclusion is that the rule of one man is the best simply. It is shown how a community should conduct itself in relation to him so as to remove the opportunity of his becoming a tyrant, but that even tyranny is to be tolerated for the sake of avoiding a greater evil It is clear from what we have said, therefore, that the rule of one, which is the best, is to be preferred, but that it can turn into a tyranny, which is the worst. It is therefore necessary to labour with diligent care to provide the community with a king who is of such a kind that it will not fall victim to a tyrant. First, then, it is necessary that the character of the man elevated to kingship by those to whom the duty of doing this belongs should be such that it is not

⁵³ Ch. IV. ⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Politics* 5:10 (1310b14).

probable that he will decline into tyranny. Hence Samuel, commending God's providence in appointing a king, says, at 1 Samuel 13:14: 'The Lord hath sought Him a man after His own heart.' Next, once the king has been appointed, the government of the kingdom should be so arranged as to remove from the king the opportunity of becoming a tyrant; and, at the same time, his power should be restricted so that he will not easily be able to fall into tyranny. How these things can be done will have to be discussed in subsequent chapters.⁵⁵ Finally, we must consider what should be done if the king does become a tyrant.

If, however, the tyranny is not excessive, it is more advantageous to tolerate a degree of tyranny for the time being than to take action against the tyrant and so incur many perils more grievous than the tyranny itself. For it may happen that those who take such action prove unable to prevail against the tyrant, and succeed only in provoking the tyrant to even greater savagery. Even when those who take action against a tyrant are able to overthrow him, this fact may in itself give rise to many very grave dissensions in the populace, either during the rebellion against the tyrant or because, after the tyrant has been removed, the community is divided into factions over the question of what the new ruling order should be. Again, it sometimes happens that a community expels a tyrant with the help of some other ruler who, having achieved power, snatches at tyranny himself and, fearing to suffer at the hands of another what he has himself done to another, forces his subjects into a slavery even more grievous than before. It is often true in cases of tyranny that a subsequent tyrant proves to be worse than his predecessor; for, while not undoing any of the troubles inflicted by his predecessor, he devises new ones of his own, out of the malice of his own heart. Thus, at a time when all the people of Syracuse desired the death of Dionysius, a certain old woman continually prayed that he would remain safe and sound and might outlive her. When the tyrant came to know of this, he asked her why she did it. She said to him: 'When I was a girl, we suffered the oppression of a tyrant, and I longed for his death. Then he was slain, but his successor was even harsher, and I thought it a great thing when his rule came to an end. But then we began to have a third ruler who was even more savage: you. And if you were to be taken from us, someone still worse would come instead.'⁵⁶

⁵⁵ St Thomas discontinued the treatise before coming to any such discussion. His thoughts on this subject are given at IaIIae 105:1 (pp. 52ff below).

⁵⁶ Valerius Maximus 6:2:2; John of Salisbury, *Policraticus* 7:25.

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If, however, a tyranny were so extreme as to be intolerable, it has seemed to some that it would be an act consistent with virtue if the mightier men were to slay the tyrant, exposing themselves even to the peril of death in order to liberate the community. Indeed, we have an example of such a thing in the Old Testament. For a certain Ehud slew Eglon, king of Moab, with a dagger 'fastened to his thigh',⁵⁷ because he oppressed the people of God with a harsh bondage; and for this deed Ehud was made a judge of the people. But this is not consistent with apostolic doctrine. For Peter teaches us to be subject with all fear not only to good and gentle masters, but also to those who are ill disposed, 'For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully' (1 Peter 2:18f). Thus, when many Roman emperors tyrannically persecuted the faith of Christ, a great part of the community, both nobles and ordinary people, were converted to the faith and are now praised because, offering no resistance, they suffered death for Christ with patience and courage, as appears clearly in the case of the holy legion of Thebes.⁵⁸ Moreover, Ehud should be adjudged to have slain an enemy of the people rather than a ruler, albeit a tyrannical one; and so also we read in the Old Testament that those who slew Joash the king of Judah were themselves slain (although their children were spared, according to the teaching of the law) even though he had turned aside from the worship of God.⁵⁹ For it would be a perilous thing, both for a community and its rulers, if anyone could attempt to slay even tyrannical rulers simply on his own private presumption. Indeed, the wicked expose themselves to such peril more often than good men do. For the lordship of a just king is usually no less a burden to the wicked than that of a tyrant; for, according to the saying of Solomon at Proverbs 20:26: 'A wise king scattereth the wicked.' What is more likely to come of such presumption, therefore, is peril to the community through the loss of a king than relief through the removal of a tyrant.

It seems, then, that steps are to be taken against the scourge of tyranny not by the private presumption of any persons, but through public

⁵⁷ I.e. with a concealed dagger: see Judges 3:14ff; cf. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus* 8:20.

⁵⁸ I.e. the Roman legion consisting of 6,666 Christian soldiers martyred 22 Sept. 286 by the emperor Maximian when they followed the example of their leader St Maurice in refusing to sacrifice to idols. The legend is found at *Acta sanctorum*, Sept. vi: 895. It is preserved in a number of versions, the best known of which is that of St Eucherius, Bishop of Lyons (434–50). See *NCE* 14, s.v. 'Theban Legion'.

⁵⁹ 2 Kings 14:5f.

authority.⁶⁰ First of all, in cases where it belongs by right to a community to provide a ruler for itself, that community can without injustice depose or restrain a king whom it has appointed, if he should abuse royal power tyrannically. Nor should such a community be thought disloyal if it acts to depose a tyrant even if the community has already pledged itself to him in perpetuity; for the tyrant who has failed to govern the community faithfully, as the office of king requires, has deserved to be treated in this way. Thus the Romans who had accepted Tarquin the Proud as their king, then ejected him from the kingship because of his and his sons' tyranny, and substituted a lesser power, that is, the consulate. So also Domitian, who succeeded the mildest of emperors, Vespasian, his father, and Titus, his brother, was slain by the Roman Senate when he exercised tyrannical power, and all the wicked things that he had inflicted upon the Romans were justly and wholesomely revoked and made void by decree of the Senate.⁶¹ Thus it came about that Blessed John the Evangelist, the beloved disciple of God, who had been sent away into exile on the island of Patmos by Domitian, was brought back to Ephesus by special senatorial decree.⁶²

If, however, the right to provide a community with a king belongs to some superior, then a remedy against the wickedness of a tyrant must be sought from him. Thus when Archelaus, who began to reign in Judea in place of his father Herod, imitated the wickedness of his father, the Jews made complaint against him to Augustus Caesar, by whom his power was first reduced, the title of king being removed from him and half his kingdom divided between his two brothers; then, when this did not keep his tyrannical behaviour in check, he was banished into exile by Tiberius Caesar to Lyons, a city of Gaul.⁶³

If, however, there can be no human aid at all against a tyrant, recourse must be had to God, the King of all, who is 'a refuge in time of trouble' (Psalm 9:9). For it is within His power to turn the heart of the cruel tyrant

⁶⁰ Cf. IIaIIae 42:2 ad 3 (p. 250, below); and *Scripta super libros sententiarum* II:44:2:2 (p. 72, below); and see Introduction, p. xxix.

⁶¹ Verbal resonances suggest that St Thomas is here relying on Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 5:12 and 21; although Augustine does not mention the assassination of Domitian, which perhaps comes from Eutropius 7:23.

⁶² See Revelation 1:9; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3:18 and 20.

⁶³ Josephus, *Bella Iudaica* 2:6f. But Josephus says that it was Augustus, not Tiberius, who exiled Archelaus, and that he was exiled to Vienne, not Lyons. St Thomas gets his – rather garbled – information here second-hand, from the *Glossa ordinaria* on Matthew 2:22 (PL 114:78). See Biographical Glossary, s.v. 'Archelaus'.