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IN MEMORY

LIFE photo by Alfred Eisenstaedt (1952) NY

Mortimer J. Adler

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The Theory of Democracy

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SOME THREE YEARS AGO Professor Mortimer Adler of the University of Chicago, in a paper *read* at the meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, propounded the thesis that there was a hierarchy in the *forms* of government, and that the *Democratic* form was the best. He distinguished three *specific* forms: the *Royal*, the *Republican* and the *Democratic* and maintained that, absolutely regarded, the last named was the best of the three because it most closely expressed the true relation of the human person to civil society, that is, to the *State*. His paper aroused no little discussion, and his thesis was challenged on several grounds. As a result of the interest thus aroused, Professor Adler and the Reverend Walter Farrell, 0.P., have been engaged jointly upon a book in which the thesis is thoroughly examined in the light of the objections urged, and their work has been appearing in instalments in *The Thomist* quarterly, New York, since July, 1941. From the portions of it I have seen, it is evident that it constitutes an exhaustive study of the whole subject of civil government which should have great and permanent interest for students and workers in this field of social relations. Enough of the study is now available to permit a clear view of the main lines of the argument and the present writer will attempt very briefly to describe those lines.

At the outset two things should be noted. The first is that the whole discussion is conducted within the Thomistic tradition in philosophical thought. The second is that it is forms that are the main matter in hand, not their application in practice. At the very outset the authors say:

> The worst misunderstanding of what we are trying to say would be to suppose our judgment of democracy to be that it is always and everywhere the best form of government for a people to adopt. Far from supposing that democracy is the best form of government relative to every historic situation, we seriously doubt whether in the world today there is any people, whose physical, economic, cultural and moral attainments are yet adequate for the full *practice* of Democracy.

And a little later they say that those who regard democracy "as the best form of government, absolutely speaking, insist that it is an ideal which has only begun to be realized in the most tenuous way and which it may take many more centuries of struggle and tribulation to bring to more substantial accomplishment for they know that the best form of government, absolutely speaking, may not be the best relative to people living under inferior physical, economic and cultural conditions." They have two aims in the present work.

The first is an adequate explication of the truth that democracy is, on moral grounds, the best form of government. The second is a reformulation of political theory in so far as it concerns the basic problem of the classification of states.

Starting with the fundamental notion of man as a moral being and, as Aristotle said, a "political animal," whose nature requires for its full development the society of others, and the ultimate "end" of whose life is "happiness," they hold that the purpose of civil government—the *finis causa*—is to promote the attainment of that "end." For this peace is a requisite, and justice must be the source of peace. For the rule of justice in a community, order is necessary, and government is necessary for order. "Government is good in proportion as it is just and one form of government is better than another in proportion as it is more just." In the light of these principles, the authors award the primacy to democracy.

In the *genus* of "good" government, the three *specific* forms, *Royal, Republican* and *Democratic* are distinguished by the manner in which political power is distributed. Royal government is "that mode of administration in which all power is concentrated in the hands of one man to be distributed to others only as his personal deputies." This is a "non-constitutional" form. Republican government is a "constitutional" form in which power is administered by a part of the community to which suffrage is restricted, and in the community "privileged" classes are recognized. Democracy is "constitutional" government with universal adult suffrage and exclusion of "privilege." "All good government is either royal or constitutional, and if constitutional, either republican or democratic." In practice, of course, there may be many *mixed* varieties, e.g., constitutional monarchy, but the *specific* differences are as described and it is the hierarchy of the species, *as* species, that is the question.

The argument turns upon analysis of the notion of political *justice* and the distinction of its elements.

Thus we see [say the authors] that a government may be just, because political power is justly exercised; it may in addition be more just because that power is justly possessed by legitimate constitution; or it may, furthermore, be most just

because that constitution is itself perfectly just in the sense that political power and authority are justly distributed.

"Justice" in government, therefore, involves something more than a "just" *exercise* of power, it requires a just *constitution* and a just *distribution* of that power. All men are *equal*, as human beings and therefore *social* beings—although *unequal* in all other respects—and are therefore entitled to some participation in the government of the society in which they live. The extent of this participation will depend for each upon his individual capacities, but distributive justice forbids the complete exclusion of any normal adult from such participation, the minimum form of which is the suffrage, the vote. Upon that principle, the republican form of government is "better" than the royal and the democratic form is "better" than the republican.

That, in substance, is the thesis of Professor Adler and Father Farrell. The objections urged against it when first proposed centered upon the notion of the "common good" as the immediate "end" of the State. It was urged that there was but *one* common good as the "end" of political order, and that this end could be achieved solely by the just *employment* of the civil power. This is possible under *any* form of government and, therefore, any form of government is as "good" as any other, and no hierarchy of forms exists. To this Professor Adler and Father Farrell reply by a distinction between the *finis causa* of political activity, "the progressive development of political institutions," and the *finis effectus*, i.e., "political activity aiming at the preservation of already existing political institutions," and they say: "In order to aim at happiness as its ultimate end, the political activity which constitutes every good form of government must be directed to the ideal terminus of progress in the political order itself." This "progress" is part of the "common good."

The body of the Adler-Farrell book consists of a closely reasoned analysis of all the fundamental notions mentioned in the foregoing summary and is a remarkable piece of orderly reasoning expressed with great lucidity, but requiring close attention. It will consist of six parts, viz., "Introduction"; "The End of Political Activity: The Common Good"; "The End of the State: Happiness"; "The Elements of Political Justice: Constitutionality"; "The Elements of Political Justice: Citizenship and Suffrage"; and finally "Conclusion: The Demonstration of Democracy with Reflections on the Motions of Political History and the Future of Democracy." All are fully documented with abundant quotations from St. Thomas Aquinas and other relevant sources and constitute a remarkable study in the science of government which should be of great and permanent interest to all concerned with this field of knowledge.

The foregoing is no more than a very brief description of the back bone of the Adler-Farrell thesis as the present writer understands it, and, naturally, such a summary can convey no adequate idea of the work itself—much less its implications, which are many and important. For these we must turn directly to the authors. One conclusion, however, suggests itself to the writer which he is irresistibly tempted to venture on his own account. That is that not merely does the validity of their thesis depend upon their fundamental concepts of the nature of man and the nature of the State, but so does any "theory" whatever of Democracy. For the notion of democracy must rest upon some theory of *equality* among men in relation to the State, and where but in relation to God can any equality in fact or in principle be discovered? The verdict of "Science" is flatly against any such equality; for, as Sir William Bateson pointed out in his presidential address to the British Association at its meeting in 1914, "polymorphism" is and always will be the characteristic of all human communities, that is, that the distribution of capacities and qualities among individuals is extremely unequal and always will be. The only possible equality lies in the moral order, and the moral order is inseparable from God. Moreover, not merely does exclusion of the moral order remove all base for Democracy in theory but in practice it must inevitably prevent it from coming into existence. In its absence there is nothing to prevent power from gravitating into the hands of the stronger, or, in those hands, to prevent its use for private advantage rather than the common good, and that is the essential form of corruption that threatens all governments. It is in that sense that President Roosevelt's statement of three years ago that religion is the source of democracy must be understood, and, so understood, it expresses a great truth, indeed the fundamental truth of the whole matter.

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