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Approaches to Demoractic Equality: Maritain, Simon, and Kolnai

Yves R. Simon states in *Philosophy of Democratic Government*:

> During the phase of democratic struggle against the old aristocratic and monarchical order, liberty and equality are considered inseparable. . . . The will to be free and the claim for equality seemed to be but two aspects of the same enthusiasm. . . . But soon a split takes place within what was the Third Estate. The Fourth Estate has arisen, with a new claim for equality—a claim which sounds unintelligible to its former allies of the bourgeoisie. . . . The formula which attributed basic unity of meaning to freedom and equality seems to have been lost as soon as the defeat of the old hierarchies was certain (*PDG* 195–97).

Tocqueville argues that equality, and not freedom, was the aim of modern democracy all along. As much as freedom and equality share a common ground, they diverge at many points. He understands the challenge to liberal democracy to be the protection of freedom and excellence in the face of its egalitarian trends.[1] Simon, too, concludes the issue of equality, and its relation to freedom, is too vital to be dodged. Simon and Maritain are known for their attempts to embrace the modern liberal tradition and its egalitarian dynamic; they attempted to purify and elevate it in terms of the Aristotelian-Thomistic political science. Thus, they represent a new

[1]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, and ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: Harper and Row, 1969). See Marvin Zetterbaum, "Alexis de Tocqueville," in Strauss and Cropsey, eds., *History and Political Philosophy*, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 761–63.

orientation of Catholic political philosophy, which hitherto had been somewhat sceptical of the liberal tradition in politics. Indeed, Paul Sigmund has recently commented about the importance of Maritain in this development.[2] Kolnai, on the other hand, highlights and defends the aristocratic element in the tradition and points to some inconsistencies and weaknesses in the liberal position, however purified or elevated. A comparison and contrast may yield some very fruitful results, both for political theory and for political practice.

We shall examine Maritain, Simon, and Kolnai in order and, for each one, give a summary of his account of equality and any moderating or counter-tendency. That is, we shall look for their idea of equality, and consider also whether and to what degree equality is desirable and possible. At stake, ultimately, is the nature and meaning of contemporary democracy and its prospects for success.

I. Maritain: The "Realist" Approach to Equality

Maritain's key writing on the question of equality is the essay "Human Equality" (*RT* 1–32).[3] Maritain develops his notion of equality through his typical method of analysis; it involves an examination of two extremes and the virtuous middle position. The first approach to human equality outlined by Maritain is the nominalist/empiricist one, which denies the reality of a universal human nature: it permits the enslavement of one part of humanity by another. The second approach is the idealist one: it denies particularity, with its concomitant inequalities, and may be labeled egalitarianism. The third approach is called "realist": it allows for unity and diversity in the human species, for equality and inequality.

The nominalist or empiricist approach is so taken with concrete inequalities that it denies any validity to the idea of a common humanity. Instead it erects biological or social divisions into essential differences, dividing the truly human from the sub-human, constructing "False hierarchies of pseudo-specific gradation which establish between men inequalities in the same order as those which apply to a lion and an ass, an eagle and an ant" (*RT* 4–5). The divisions may correspond to social

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[2]Paul Sigmund, "Maritain on Politics," in Deal Hudson and Matthew Mancini, eds., *Understanding Maritain* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987) 153–55; see H. Rommen, *The State in Catholic Thought* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1947), 483–503.

[3]See Donald Gallagher's introduction to the reissue of Maritain's *Christianity and Democracy and The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, xxviii–xxxii.

privilege, such as those of aristocratic birth or bourgeois wealth, or to supposed differences in race or ethnicity. The error lies in the rigid ideological posturing by which common humanity is denied of an entire segment of the species, and a group thereby "concentrates into itself" all the dignity and privileges of human nature. The lower group exists only for the higher group. But, as Maritain readily argues, the claimed superiority for a group or bloc is always undermined because of the aggregate nature of the excellence or inequality. That is, the values are on average or on the whole. Moreover, there may be overlapping from one group to the next. Aristotle uses a similar argument against conventional slavery and hereditary privilege.[4] The boundary separating the groups is usually so variable and fluid that it can be "broadened or contracted as the mind wishes." Finally, Maritain points out that an inferior group can improve; and in fact, both groups share "a common natural pattern which they more or less fully realize."

Maritain's critique of the nominalist approach makes the standard case against slavery or tyranny. It is critical of extreme forms of oligarchy, which Aristotle argues border on tyranny. But Maritain's argument only grazes the superior claims of the aristocrat or monarch. It does not touch them if their claims do not entail a superiority in essence or a reduction of the other to the status of slave. If the claim of superiority is detached from an ethnic and/or hereditary basis, and is rather claimed by an individual, its high reach is left open.

The relevance of this false "nominalist" approach was quite pressing in the face of National Socialism and its racist creed, and it remains so to challenge any form of racial exploitation. Also, if economic conditions of some segments of a regime are oppressive to the point of slave-like exploitation, the critique is operative. Maritain does not make the relevant applications in this essay.

The idealist approach to equality excludes empirical inequalities and treats the unity of mankind in the abstract. Maritain charges this approach with a "speculative denial" of natural inequality, because it considers inequalities as solely the result of the artificial stratification of social life. Hence, inequality is a "pure accident" suggesting no intelligible patterns for the mind. This leads further to a practical denial of inequality, because it is "an outrage against human dignity." The egalitarian idea of equality demands simple equality and uniformity. Its instinctive tendency, Maritain says, is hatred of superiority and a levelling spirit: "In mental pat-

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[4]Aristotle, *Politics*, 1255b 1.

terms which correspond to this, there develops an uneasy touchiness regarding any possibility of a hierarchy of value among men" (*RT* 14).

Maritain's analysis of egalitarianism is very pointed; its major thrust runs counter to the claim of pure democracy. And it certainly allows no room for a democracy based upon value relativism. Maritain's critique of its abstract reduction of particularity resonates to some contemporary developments in the critique of democratic theory concerning the unencumbered self.[5] Maritain's critique of the two extreme approaches to equality comes down hardest on the egalitarian approach. Here, Maritain is more spirited and better aimed at real types. The nominalist approach is more hateful, he says, but the idealist approach is more treacherous and leads to worse forms of slavery, because it embodies a "bitter passion counterfeiting Christian charity" (*RT* 16; *TR* 130, 140, 145).

The realist approach to equality leads Maritain to eschew the idealist one in favor of an "existentialist one." Equality is found not in an abstract ideal, but in "the root energies and sources of being" that lead human beings to seek communication with each other. Rather than use the notion of equal nature, Maritain favors the notion of community in nature. He would found equality on the natural sociability of men, and specifically in a tendency to love one's own. It is similar, I would say, to Aristotle's notion of natural friendship, or philanthropy.[6]

Maritain adroitly develops a defense of inequality out of the same unity in nature that grounds equality. Sociality demands differentiation and differentiation demands inequality. Maritain gathers up and develops the various reasons for inequality in a human community. I refer to them as the metaphysical principle of variety, the principle of individual merit, and the social principle of differentiation. Maritain cites Thomas' argument that inequality, order, and hierarchy are part of divine creation.[7] As for individual merit, Maritain points to moral, psychological, and even biological origins. In *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain refers to the "habitus" of virtue as a "metaphysical title to nobility" that makes for inequality among men (*AS* 11). Finally, diversity of internal structures in society and diversity of conditions result from social life itself; in fact, he says that inequalities testify to the "inconquerable originality and vitality of social life."

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[5]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981) and Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and Its Critics* (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

[6]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 1, 1155a 20.

[7]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 85, 7; I, 47, 2.

Maritain makes a strong affirmation of the necessity and value of inequality. He says further that Christianity does not iron out social inequalities, but brings them into "true proportion" (*RT* 23; *TR* 145–46). The true proportion of inequality is its two-fold subordination to equality. It must not obscure the foundational value of equality nor must it impede the progressive development of equality in society. Social inequality, he says, must not be a principle of exclusion but one of communication; the inequalities must not be erected into a state of social servitude, nor should the man in the lower condition be considered an inferior man without dignity. Maritain reminds the reader of his criticism of the nominalist approach to equality, which would "harden" the inequalities and become oppressive. The primordial unity of human nature is the basis for the inequalities—the latter are justified in terms of the community. But, as was noted above, this amounts to nothing more than strictures on tyranny or exploitation. The "true proportion of equality to inequality," however, also includes something more. Maritain now introduces his notion of progressive social equality as an aim and purpose of a just society.

Social equality, he writes, "rises up progressively in the midst of society, like a social flowering forth or fructifying of the equality of nature" (*RT* 26). For example, although fundamental rights of the person are anterior to society, the legal order must increasingly embody protection for them. Further, the rights of the person in the political and economic spheres require continual progress in awareness of the rights, conditions for fulfillment, and embodiment in law and fact. The inequalities in society must be compensated for by a "redistribution" of benefits such that the higher benefits are open to all and such that the dignity of lower level is acknowledged through a proportional equal opportunity for fulfillment. Further, Maritain states that all should "in so far as possible participate 'free of charge' in the elementary goods needed for human life" (*RT* 29). The *telos* of political community is equality, not the perpetuation of inequalities. Thus, through this second subordination of inequality to equality, Maritain surmounts the aristocratic orientation of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition from which he derives his basic concepts.

Of course, it is crucial to Maritain's own account that the principal qualities dominant in monarchical and aristocratic regimes are

"preserved" in the democratic regime, even while being "transcended" (*RMNL* 51–52). How are these qualities preserved? Does it not require the presence of countervailing principles within the democratic regime? Has Maritain paid sufficient attention to the problem and the tensions inherent in the mixing of political principles?[8]

Maritain acknowledges the many obstacles that frustrate the ready achievement of the democratic principle of equality. Progress towards social equality is a long arduous road. The democratic principle of equality is marked by a "dynamism." It requires the "conquest of man over nature and over himself." It is "an end to struggle for, and with difficulty, and at the price of a constant tension of the energies of the spirit." The tensions are indeed real. For Maritain, by linking equality with his high idea of liberty, keeps an elevating tone to its progress. That is, excellence and standards are held firmly in place by his account of liberty. His is not a "levelling equality." Further, the qualification of social equality with the "proportion" to condition and function is bound to disappoint the contemporary egalitarian movement. Maritain states that identical opportunity, strict equal opportunity, is an illusion. What are the conditions, the merits, and functions that would limit proportionately equal opportunity? His remarks on equality for women are instructive on this point (*IH* 196–99).

Other tensions emerge from Maritain's account. Is the progress to the free participation in the goods needed for human life a call for state socialism, socialized health care for example? The problem is, of course, that this tendency, if centralized, can run counter to the principle of differentiation and pluralism. How is equality to be achieved? Maritain's metaphor of "flowering" is too vague: the hard question of means, such as affirmative action, quotas, and the like, are not treated in his account. It is hard to gauge his position given the dynamism towards equality on the one hand and the desire for pluralism and a high liberty on the other. Tocqueville saw this as the overriding tension and issue.[9] Maritain views the

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[8]See criticisms of Edward Goerner, "Aristocracy and Natural Right," *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 17 (1972): 1–13. See also John Hittinger, "Maritain and America," *This World* 3 (Fall, 1982): 113–23, and "Review of Maritain's 'Rights of Man and Natural Law' " in *Crisis* 5:7 (July/August, 1987): 50–52.

[9]A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 690–705; see Whitney Pope, *Alexis de Tocqueville* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1986), 52–63.

two in tandem and therefore fails to acknowledge the deeper tension in democratic theory and practice.

Perhaps the greatest tension surrounds his notion of progress. Even though Maritain speaks about the law of twofold contrasting progress of good and evil in history, he often fails to acknowledge the presence of intrinsic limitations on progress, particularly in political life (*PH* 143–57).[10] Will progress overcome the tensions in political life or are we faced with inherent tensions whose resolution must be managed? Plato speaks about the paradox of philosopher-king, Aristotle of the incommensurable claims to rule, Madison of self-interest, faction, and common good, Tocqueville of glory and welfare; and thus they accommodate themselves accordingly, by means of the noble lie, the mixed regime, checks and balances, self-interest properly understood. These political thinkers would certainly not claim that democracy replicates the qualities of monarchy or aristocracy in any pure form, let alone would they claim that democracy transcends them to a superior level of achievement in their own line or according to their distinctive principle. The qualities are replicated in some analogous but less pure form, and only as the result of mixing in a principle that counteracts the pure democratic principle.

The polarity of individual and person plays a central role in Maritain's philosophy, but this polarity lends weight to the progressive resolution of the tensions themselves. The trajectory of realization is potentially unlimited, according to the "conquest" of man over nature and over himself, the conditions Maritain names as the engine or dynamism for the progress towards greater equality. Does his account give too much sail to the prospects for democratic achievement?

II. Simon: The Egalitarian Dynamism And the Principle of Autonomy

Simon's political philosophy reflects a greater awareness of the inherent tensions of political life as such and he explicitly deals with the tension of equality and liberty. More specifically, he affirms Maritain's ideal of social equality, but he has a much better defined counter-tendency in the principle of autonomy (*PDG* 130). The latter principle is also important to Maritain (*MS* 24). But Simon carefully works through the tensions and arrives at well-defined principles of compromise. He does not speak of a brotherly city of the future; if anything, his concluding chapter on technol-

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[10]See Thomas Flynn, "Time Redeemed: Maritain's Christian Philosophy of History," in Hudson and Mancini, *Understanding Maritain*, 307–24.

ogy carries an undertone of very limited expectations.

Simon begins his account of democratic equality with Maritain's idea of the notion of equality as a common human nature, rejecting the nominalist bias of doctrines of inequality. He excludes the doctrine that humankind can be divided essentially by race into higher and lower. Equality is grounded in potential for community life. He then turns the account more directly to the problem of equality and its tensions. The ideal of equality deriving from common humanity can be applied in a strict fashion and in the fashion of a tendency. For example, all men are covered by the norm prohibiting the killing of innocent life. Race, social standing, wealth, and so forth are irrelevant considerations here. Any excepting conditions are made on principle, like self-defense, not on an arbitrary basis. Simon, writing in 1950, prophetically mentions abortion and euthanasia as great violations of the ideal of equality and common humanity. Similarly, fair exchange demands a strict equality, for again race, wealth, and the like are not relevant factors. But, in other demands for equal consideration, limitations must be acknowledged. Hence, in some cases, equality must be adopted as a "progressive tendency" to greater realization. The two examples considered are health care and education. All human beings ought to be protected from disease and death. The desire for life is equal in all segments of society, Simon says. On this point, Simon claims that our conscience has improved (*PDG* 205).[11] But it does not follow, he says, that it is in our power to provide equal protection to all, nor is it "necessarily iniquitous that it [society] fails to do so." But society must be on a "track" leading to equal protection for all. This is "the equalitarian dynamism contained in the unity of human nature." But this dynamism, he says, is often lawfully restricted and delayed. Why? Its implementation may require "an enormously increased weight of bureaucratic organization [and a loss] of a considerable amount of liberty." He gives a similar account of education; society must be on track to greater opportunity, but the recognition of different abilities and conditions, and the problem of freedom and taxes, may restrict it.

Despite these "lawful restrictions and delays" in the realization of equality, Simon insists that democratic theory and practice be gauged above all in terms of progress in equality. Conservativism, he warns, simply seeks to maintain the advantages of small minorities. At best, Simon would allow for a form of "fiscal conservativism," from what he has said

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[11]Cf. Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1959), 309, and Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1117b 10.

about lawful restrictions. Does it follow, then, that democratic theory and practice must posit as a regulative ideal the eventual suppression of all advantage and privilege with the inequality that accompany them? That is, has Simon reduced the "conservative" objection to that of means and efficiency? Could greater power and technical prowess enhance progress in equality and pare down the conservative objections? Should democratic regimes be ever in search of greater power and take advantage of any possible advance in equality?

Simon argues very strenuously against this conclusion on the basis of the principle of autonomy or subsidiarity. Simon entertains the following proposition: "inequality should never be determined by any consideration foreign to individual merit." Simon says that this well-sounding vague notion has the "character of radicalism made inconspicuous" (*PDG* 223). Yet it would seem one is driven to this point by a certain logic in the equalitarian dynamism. For legal equality and open opportunity can neutralize aristocratic privilege. But then education, position, and other factors such as wealth can still leave great gaps in equal opportunity. Strict equal opportunity must eradicate "all privilege or handicap attaching to hazard of birth." If so, the right of inheritance and any family influence would stand in the way of equality. But the elimination of the family is a utopian scheme that would subject men to a far greater arbitrariness; hence Simon's fear of "radicalism made inconspicuous."

Simon backs off to a larger context in order to resolve the antinomy. The problem is biased by "an individualistic preconception." The family and social being is part of the good life desired for each citizen. Thus, "some of the things for which opportunity is sought are of such a nature as to balance and restrict the principle of equal opportunity." Equal opportunity is carried too far when "it threatens to dissolve the small communities from which men derive their best energies in the hard accomplishments of daily life." From the perspective of human flourishing, the principle of equality is limited not only by technical efficiency, but also by a positive notion of the good life.

Simon concludes with three principles pertaining to equal opportunity, thus gathering the various elements in tension: a democratic regime must strive for legal equality; it must take positive measures to avoid factual exclusion from any function, e.g., financial help for education; it must allow the greatest possible autonomy to prevail (*PDG* 229). The first principle reflects the strict equality of common humanity; the second principle reflects the equalitarian dynamism of a democratic regime; the third principle, Simon says, makes the principle of equal opportunity less absolute: without it, equal opportunity would be "a first class factor of atomization and a formidable wrecker of democratic communities."

Simon succinctly formulates the principle of autonomy or subsidiarity as

> the metaphysical law which demands . . . that no task which can be satisfactorily fulfilled by the smaller unit should ever be assumed by the larger unit. . . . It is perfectly obvious that there is more life and, unqualifiedly, greater perfection in a community all parts of which are full of initiative than in a community whose parts act merely as instruments transmitting the initiative of the whole (*PDG* 129–30).

Simon does not denounce state intervention in principle—it could well serve freedom from exploitation and even strengthen autonomic institutions. Further, he does not want to suggest that the state is evil in essence or adopt the individualist preconception on the libertarian side that he sought to avoid on the egalitarian side. But, given the tendency of the modern state to expand, Simon cannot overemphasize the principle of autonomy. Concerning the problem of "free distribution" mentioned above, Simon also invokes the principle of autonomy, so as to rule out a socialist interpretation. The great problem, he says, is to make it "independent of the arbitrariness of individual whims without delivering it up to the arbitrariness of public powers and their bureaucracy." In all facets, the "absolutism of the state must be held in check by forces external to the state apparatus" (*PDG* 252, 137). Church, press, private school, labor unions, co-operatives of different sorts, and private property and free enterprise are all conditions of the principle of autonomy.

Simon's principle of autonomy leads him beyond the democratic regime to the idea of the mixed regime as the best. Any regime, he says, may need the operation of a principle distinct from and opposed to its own idea. The association of democracy with non-democratic, which must mean non-egalitarian, principles may be necessary to serve the common good and to check its own weaknesses. In fact, Simon's ultimate defense of democracy, universal suffrage, rests not upon the claim of the common man as such, but a "pessimistic" reason—resistance to the power of the state and elites (*PDG* 98). Thus, universal suffrage is but one of many devices necessary for the promotion of freedom.

In Simon, we find a more direct acknowledgement of the inherent tensions in the egalitarian claims of democracy. In his account, we find a statement of the equalitarian dynamism, but it is held in check by a counter-principle of autonomy. Simon, even more than Maritain, emphasizes the conservative element in political theory. But does his reading of the equalitarian dynamic set up a dialectic in which the citizens are always discontent and disappointed? Tocqueville observed that the idea of equality promotes envy precisely because the means for achieving equality are "constantly proving inadequate in the hands of those using

them." Further, he says:

> Democratic institutions awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it entirely. . . . [The people] are excited by the chance and irritated by the uncertainty of success; the excitement is followed by weariness and then by bitterness. In that state anything which in any way transcends the people seems an obstacle to their desires, and they are tired by the sight of any superiority, however legitimate.[12]

Concerning the problems of envy and mediocrity, Simon says simply that "these risks are well known and do not call for any elaboration" (*PDG* 214). But, without further elaborating, does Simon not run the risk of jeopardizing the principle of autonomy? By stressing the equalitarian tendency in contemporary democracy, he must then place the principle of subsidiarity/autonomy in the position of a check or a drag against the expansion of equality. Is it doomed to fight a rear-guard action and forever face the wrath of disappointed egalitarians?

III. Kolnai: Pluralism as a Conservative Principle

Aurel Kolnai was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1900. He studied philosophy at the University of Vienna, where he converted to Catholicism, in part due to the influence of the writings of G.K. Chesterton and the German Phenomenological School. Of Jewish extraction, Kolnai viewed the rise of National Socialism with particular alarm; he spent six years writing a critique of their doctrines, a book later published as *The War Against the West*.[13] His output was not as vast as Maritain or Simon, but he produced some very good essays in the fields of ethics and political philosophy. For the account of equality, we are interested in his review of

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[12]A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 198.

[13]Aurel Kolnai, *The War Against the West* (New York: Viking, 1939). For a biography and bibliography, see A. Kolnai, *Ethics, Value and Reality*, eds. Bernard Williams and David Wiggins, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978). See also Lee Congdon, "Aurel Kolnai: In Defense of Christian Europe," *The World and I* 3:9 (September 1988): 630–45. Articles to be examined include his review of Maritain's *Man and the State*—"The Synthesis of Christ and the Anti-Christ," *Integrity* V (1951): 40–45; "The Meaning of the Common Man," *Thomist* (1949): 272–335; and "Privilege and Liberty," *Université Laval Théologique et Philosophique* V (1949): 66–110.

Maritain's *Man and the State*, and two articles, "The Meaning of the Common Man," and "Privilege and Liberty."

Kolnai's criticism of Maritain is admittedly captious in tone and not entirely fair in representing the balanced sweep of Maritain's political philosophy as a whole.[14] On the other hand, *Man and the State*, with its democratic creed and its praise of shock troops like John Brown, is open to criticism. Kolnai identifies some critical weak points in Maritain's philosophy. Maritain does not recognize the tension between the "orderly life of democratic institutions" and the "spirit of mass subjectivism . . . which is the driving force of the democratic creed." Or, further, he clings to a dogma of "boundless terrestrial optimism." Maritain has a ready response to these charges. But there is something in his orientation that causes such an impression. Perhaps Kolnai scores the most direct hit in his praise of Maritain's concern for "pluralism." A pluralistic society, Kolnai says, "relies precisely upon given realities in their manifoldness, contingency and limitation," and is therefore "refractory" and opposed to a streamlined creation of social reality. "In other words," Kolnai says, "pluralism, if taken seriously, involves a conservative outlook."

Kolnai's claim is not simply a matter of labels. Russell Kirk outlines six principles of conservative thought as follows—a belief in a transcendent moral order, social continuity, prescription, prudence, variety, and imperfectibility.[15] Maritain and Simon affirm all of these principles in one way or another; and, indeed, they rely on them to structure the life of the city and to check and even brake the progressive spirit of social equality, as shown above. But does not this put the conservative value always in the rearguard, always catching up, and on the defensive? The position of Simon and Maritain would seem to encourage ardent hopes for equality that must then be dashed by the hidden conservative principle. Kolnai notices that, when conservative forces and conceptions serve as mere "brakes" on progress, an ambivalence and impatience is evoked towards them. Democratic society is faced, then, with an alternative: "maintenance of institutional freedoms and the full acceptation of the religion of the Common Man."[16]

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[14]Kolnai, "Synthesis," 41. For a more temperate but incisive criticism of Maritain's project, see Ernest Fortin, "The New Rights Theory and the Natural Law," *Review of Politics* (October, 1982): 590–612.

[15]Russell Kirk, Introduction to *The Portable Conservative Reader* (New York: Viking, 1982), xv–xviii.

[16]Kolnai, "Privilege," 88–89.

Kolnai reveals an internal weakness in a philosophy of democratic government that emphasizes the principle of equality and aims at surpassing or neutralizing privilege. Liberal democracy, he says, will always appear in this light as insufficiently democratic, as insufficiently advanced "in its own direction." And this sets up a temptation to abandon "mere formal or political democracy" for real, substantial, or social democracy. The contradiction between formal equality and socioeconomic privilege leads to an attack upon privilege and the advocacy of a democracy of the common man. But Kolnai claims that this strikes at the very root of order and hastens its collapse.[17]

Kolnai's proposal is to approach the defense of democracy and equality from another perspective, stressing the principle of pluralism and autonomy as the leading idea. He says:

> What we have in mind is not, of course, a proposal to substitute for Western Democracy along with its ideological biases, a fancy system of Conservative Constitutionalism, nor a return to this or that specified stage of the past, but a suggestion to displace the spiritual stress from the "common man" aspect of democracy to its aspect of constitutionalism and of moral continuity with the high tradition of Antiquity, Christendom and the half-surviving Liberal cultures of yesterday.[18]

Kolnai wishes to emphasize rule of law, balance and limitation, responsible government, federalism, and the consent of the governed. He defends universal suffrage, as Simon does, as a check to the power of rule.[19] But checks and balances are not sufficient to maintain a regime of liberty, Kolnai argues. He calls it a "fallacy of federalism" to believe that "plurality of forms" and decentralization alone is sufficient to defend liberty. Administrative decentralization, he points out, could simply deal with a subsection of a still uniform whole. Moreover, equality as such

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[17]*Ibid.*, 93.

[18]Kolnai, "Common Man," 274.

[19]"It is indubitably true that a system of government in which the 'plain man' as such 'has a say' is intrinsically better than government by an esoteric caste of public officials no matter how well bred, 'cultured' or 'public spirited.' This is what perennially validates Democracy in the sane sense of the term, as contrasted to its erection into a false religion of secular messianism. Democracy, in that same sense, means participation at various levels of the broad strata of the people in the shaping of public policy," *Ibid.*, 309.

tends to "centralization and uniformity." Tocqueville demonstrated this trend in democracy. In addition to federal or plural forms, an appreciation of difference and inequality is required. For the substance and savor of an intermediate group is constituted by "its particular structure of authority, of loyalty and allegiance, of tradition and formative power, of 'rulership' and obedience."[20] In short, vertical relationships with patterns of privilege within various groups and within society as a whole are essential to true autonomy and federalism.

Natural inequality, he argues, is "essentially inseparable" from artificial inequality. Further, natural distinction is a fruit of privilege and generative of new privilege.[21] The moderate equalitarian position, he says, fails to see this, and thus must remain hostile to privilege. The ideal of equality demands the elimination of privilege. Kolnai objects that not only does this approach to equality rest upon an individualist premise, but it is also an approach that tends to a reductionistic and uniform view of the good. And finally, the approach requires a centralized consciousness to administer and ensure equality. The equalitarian ideal may be opposed to any principle of autonomy.

The role of hierarchy and privilege must be understood in their full social valence and not simply as a "necessary evil." Kolnai defines privilege as: "a positional value in society relatively independent of the will of society."[22] Social hierarchy does not and is not meant to correspond univocally with the hierarchy of moral or intellectual values. Rather, hierarchy expresses the bondage of all men to what is intrinsically better than they.

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[20]Kolnai, "Privilege," 97–98.

[21]*Ibid.*, 86–87.

[22]"A society in which liberty is to thrive can only be a society rich in privileges, affording manifold means of redress and opportunities (not devised in the spirit bent upon effacing the framework of privileges) to the 'underprivileged': a society capitalistic in the sense of containing and recognizing finite power factors and formative influences in their own right, besides state power and the prevailing mood of the collective; a society ennobled and oriented by a plural system of 'hierarchies' pervading it with supra-social value references as contrasted with its totalitarian self-worship—hierarchies limited in their scope, but also sustained, by their mutual action and interpenetration, and again balanced by, but on their part helping to support and vitalize (as social realities), the constitutional design of public power, the validity of universal moral law, the protection of general human and civil rights, and the plane of Christian equality among men," *Ibid.*, 96.

That is, social values are not good simply as an immanent unfolding of my volitions and needs, but objectively good.[23] The equalitarian tendency, in its objection to privilege, often masks a rejection of an objective order of values and the limited power of man. Kolnai sees here a metaphysical rebellion at the heart of the enterprise. And this is why a more radical assertion of human power in communism is a possible outcome of the trajectory of progressive democracy.

Kolnai thinks that liberty cannot be defended nor maintained without a vertical limitation on its use. He shares the concern of Solzhenitsyn about the abuse of liberty permitted within the context of its horizontal limitation by equal right alone. We need not only a theocentric humanism to provide the notion of liberty under God, but also the entire range of intermediary groups with their embodiment of high moral value and authority. The liberal conception of society, he argues, cannot support and protect liberty "except in a precarious and self-contradictory fashion." It must rely on conservative values such as autonomy, pluralism *et al*. But such values, while "unofficially tolerated," are "continually harassed and eaten away, by the immanent dialectic of liberal society as such." The university and the Church are perhaps the key intermediate groups to resist this harassment. It is the mission of these institutions, Kolnai urges, to "inoculate the national mind with the seeds of objective value reference, of a vision of things 'sub specie aeterni,' of intellectual independence and moral backbone."[24]

Kolnai thus would have us use the principle of pluralism and differentiation not in the rearguard as a mere check to equality, but as a vanguard in the promotion of excellence and the things that make a human life worth leading.

Conclusion

Maritain, Simon, and Kolnai have political philosophies and approaches to democracy that share the same essential elements. However, the stress within each approach is different. The former two stress the equalitarian tendency of modern democracy, which they check with the principle of autonomy or subsidiarity. Kolnai argues that this approach to autonomy and liberty, in a political perspective, appears as a mere brake or counterprogressive element. As a result, it seems like a reactionary position opposing the march of progress. Further, the use of autonomy as a

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[23]Kolnai, "Common Man," 294; see also "Privilege," 72–73.

[24]*Ibid*., 288–89.

principle of greater efficiency may prompt dreams of greater human power.

Kolnai's proposal to lead with the idea of virtue and pluralism allows political philosophy to be countercultural with respect to the democratic tendencies even in order to serve it well. That is, the principle of hierarchy can be adapted to a democratic regime defined in terms of rule of law and the society of free men and women. The ideal of equality can then be absorbed through the system of a balanced society in which each segment of society should be nourished but checked for a common good; that is, the idea of a mixed regime, in which all claims to rule are duly regarded, provides grounds for opposing oligarchical exploitation and a defense of equal rights. How far can we take this in establishing justice for all sectors and levels of society without invoking the progressive tendencies that lead to envy and disappointment?

The three thinkers together represent a remarkable philosophy of government with many fruitful tensions. Maritain and Simon offer the more comprehensive and daring applications of Thomistic philosophy to the problems of the day. But Kolnai offers an interesting corrective. The observations of Heinrich Rommen on the characteristics of Catholic political philosophy are quite apt in this case:

> Political philosophy in Catholic thought with its constitutive polar system will, through all of its eras, show a conservative and a liberal strain; it will depend upon the particular circumstances of an era which of them will be more outspoken. Furthermore, each of them keeps the other from falling into extremes. The continuous defense and attack that each needs and makes against the other prevents either from monopolizing political philosophy.[25]

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[25]H. Rommen, *The State in Catholic Thought*, 500.