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A "Catholic Whig" Replies

Michael Novak

When the Whigs define themselves as the Party of Liberty, furthermore, they define liberty in a special way. They do not mean libertinism or any other disordered form of liberty, such as a supposed "liberty to do whatever one feels like doing." For them, a liberty undirected by reflection and choice is slavery. For them, liberty must be achieved through a self-mastery that nourishes reflection and choice. Such self-mastery is won by slowly gaining dominion over appetite, passion, ignorance, and whim. For them, the enabling agent and protector of liberty is virtue—indeed, a full quiver of virtues. (*This Hemisphere of Liberty*, 1992, pp.9-10)

In his final sentences, after much smoke and fury, Professor Rourke makes quite modest (but still false) charges against my work. Were he to study this work more fairly, removing his ideological blinders provisionally, he might grasp at least its underlying intention, namely, to replace the unsustainable liberal argument for the free society with a Christian argument. Many people judge that I have achieved much of that. Even non-Christian thinkers are adopting parts of it.

Yet Rourke does not yet grasp my intention for three systemic reasons. First, he interprets Catholic social doctrine as though it were the ideology of social democracy. Second, he cannot seem to understand other points of view. Third, he systematically misstates my views by reading into them secular liberal philosophical commitments that I have long written against.

In addition, Rourke uses the term *liberalism* equivocally and nonhistorically, sweeping under one term a host of different positions taken by a host of diverse authors. In his book, *Liberalisms*, John Gray of Oxford shows greater wisdom. For the sense in which John Rawls speaks of liberalism is quite different from that often applied to Friedrich Hayek, and so forth. (Hayek, in fact, identifies himself with the "Whig" tradition, as embodied in St. Thomas Aquinas, Lord Acton, and Alexis de Tocqueville—as it happens, all Catholics). Further, as E. E. Y. Hales, Etienne Gilson, and other commentators on Catholic social thought have pointed out, the term liberalism means something very different in Italy, France, and Germany than in England, and something different again in the United States.

Having failed to sort out these equivocations in his use of a central term in his analysis, Rourke further fails to identify precisely what that great scholar Yves Simon meant by liberalism. Again, he disregards the crucial distinction between liberal *institutions* and liberal *doctrines* made on the first page of *Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions*, the second volume of my trilogy on political economy. The thesis of this book, I wrote:

may be simply stated: Although the Catholic Church during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries set itself against liberalism *as an ideology*, it has slowly come to support the moral efficacy of liberal *institutions*. Most clearly, it has come to support institutions of human rights, but it has also—more slowly—come to support institutions of democracy and market-oriented economic development. (p. xiii)

This distinction is also the basic premise of my follow-up studies, *Free Persons and the Common Good* and *This Hemisphere of Liberty*. Unanchored without it, Rourke's argument is adrift on a sea of abstractions. If one lists the commitments that he attributes to "liberalism," one can immediately think of many liberals who do not share them, and will be hard pressed to think of anyone in the real world who holds all of them.

The *institutions* that have been developed in countries sometimes described as liberal are one thing; *doctrines* put forth by liberal philosophers to defend them are another. Often, liberal institutions embody elements derived from the dynamism of earlier Jewish and Christian cultures. Thus, Jacques Maritain saw in democratic institutions under the rule of law, constituted by limited government, and protecting the rights of individuals and minorities, the slow working out in history of the yeast of the Gospels. Maritain and Simon taught two generations (including Paul VI) that, while liberal doctrines are insufficient to explain or to defend democratic institutions, the latter merit a profound philosophical and theological defense by Christian thinkers and activists. Even earlier, at the III Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1889, the U.S. Catholic bishops noted that, under Providence, the U.S. Founders had built "better than they knew."

An analogous shift occurred in Catholic social thought regarding the judgment to be rendered on institutions of religious liberty. Catholic thinkers have presented new philosophical, theological, and practical *grounds* for the defense of regimes of religious liberty,

rejecting some of the doctrines put forward in this respect by various liberal theorists. As bishop of Krakow at the Second Vatican Council, Karol Wojtyla argued eloquently that the declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* was not only an issue for the United States, France, and other Western nations, but a universal issue rooted in the fundamental dignity of the human person. This argument is said to have been decisive for Paul VI, who sent the declaration forward for urgent action before the Council adjourned.

Regarding democracy and religious liberty, therefore, evidence is overwhelming that, having at first opposed institutions at first called "liberal," the Church has learned by experience to sift the wheat from the chaff—to accept certain institutions because of their proven fruits, while continuing to reject inadequate philosophies of human nature and destiny.

Today, the Church seems to be doing the same with regard to proven institutions in the economic field. For those, like Rourke, who have identified Catholic social thought with social democracy, this increasingly positive judgment on certain aspects of markets, incentives, enterprise, invention and public choice economics, is obviously disturbing. The crucial prudential question they must face is which sort of economic system has historically proven better for the common good, and especially for the poor.

As of 1986, there had not been even one entry on the common good in *The Catholic Periodical and Literature Index* for nearly 20 years, and it was part of my purpose in *Free Persons and the Common Good* to remedy that neglect. Further, new definitions of the common good by Catholic scholars both just before and during the Second Vatican Council highlighted "the fulfillment of the *person*" as an essential aspect of the common good. This new stress on the person created certain strains in the definitions handed down by Aristotle and Aquinas. While the profound discussions of these matters by De Koninck, Maritain, and Simon were available to guide my own argument for most of the way, they were pre-conciliar. My book was written for the fortieth anniversary of Maritain's. It would have been insufficient merely to parrot his views.

Besides, the minds of Maritain and Simon had been formed in Europe, and much of their writing during their most productive years was directed to the building of a new society in Europe on the ruins left by World War II. However, the political, cultural, and economic experience of the United States matters heavily for European reconstruction after 1945 and, further, offered new

materials to universal reflection, with regard both to the person and to the common good. This is especially true regarding how the common good is actually achieved, and to a progressively higher level decade by decade. Maritain dared American Catholics to cease hiding under a bushel the light that flowed from our own distinctive traditions. For people born poor, he recognized, the level of opportunity was then, and is now, higher in America than in Europe. In many ways, the actual achievement of a higher level of the common good offers here more reasons for realistic hope. Why is that? What institutional design makes it so?

By my count, Rourke finds eight errors in my thought. At these points, he makes eight misstatements of my thought. A few examples may suffice. All his misstatements have a systematic source: he imputes to me liberal understandings that I do not share.

a. *That I deny the role of "authority as the agent which intends the common good materially":* "Yet, precisely because not all citizens can know the full material content of the common good—what in particular needs to be done here and now—there emerges a natural need for organs of national decision-making; in short, for authorities of various types, responsible for exercises of expertise and power within a limited range. And, at some points, this veil of ignorance naturally requires the highest authority in the national community (executive or legislative or judicial, as appropriate) to make certain key decisions regarding next practical steps forward" (*Free Persons and the Common Good*, p.184 and *passim*).

b. *That I have an individualist, and finally nihilist concept of freedom which breaks "the connection between freedom and its objective moral foundation."* Yet in *Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions*, I wrote: "The Catholic tradition held that liberalism as a moral doctrine too lightly valued authority and tradition in religion, and yielded too much to individual conscience, which after all is prey to whim, the spirit of the age, and unreliable contrariety. Furthermore, excessive individualism destroys the family, as 'looking out for number one' destroys the national community. The distorting tendency of radical individualism is narcissism, which diminishes the moral stature of every person who yields to it" (p. 23).

In my Templeton address, "Awakening from Nihilism," I stressed that "There are two types of liberty: one pre-critical, emotive, whimsical, proper to children; the other critical, sober, deliberate, responsible, and proper to adults. Alexis de Tocqueville called attention to this alternative early in *Democracy in America*, and at

Cambridge Lord Acton put it this way: Liberty is not the freedom to do what you wish; it is the freedom to do what you ought. Human beings are the only creatures on earth that do not blindly obey the laws of their nature, by instinct, but are free to choose to obey them with a loving will. Only humans enjoy the liberty to do what we ought to do—or alas, not to do it." I have written against the failures of liberal philosophies of liberty many times. Rourke attacks those I attack.

c. *That I deny the formal common good its role as a moral principle, splitting it from the material common good:* As Maritain used to say, *Distinguer pour unir.* (The distinction between the formal and the material common good is his). "To exhort people to pursue the (formal) common good is easier than to figure out, in practice here and now, which of many material courses of action will best attain it" (*Free Persons and the Common Good.*, p.185). And again:

Do the people of the United States will the common good—the good of the American experiment, the good of the nation? Many have willingly died for it. Lincoln led the nation through the bloodiest civil war until that time to preserve "the Union." And the will to pursue together the common good is fully implied within the much loved patriotic hymn:

*God bless America! Land that I love.
Stand beside her, and guide her,
Through the night with the light from above.*

This stanza expresses almost perfectly the formal content of a properly formed commitment to the common good (the fidelity of the commonwealth to God's will). It evokes as well the veil of ignorance any people must face 'through the night,' in trying to discern which material content best achieves that formal intention in practice. (*Ibid.*, pp. 187-88)

d. *That I deny the principle of the universal destination of material goods, by arguing that a regime of private property is the most practical way to attain it:* But so also argued Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas, Leo XIII, and John Paul II—that experience shows in four or five different ways that a regime of private property is more likely than communal ownership to serve the universal destination of material goods. Rourke's hostility to a regime of private property is foreign to the Catholic tradition. In the United States, rights to private property may legally be overridden in certain circumstances and with due process; they are not absolute. In *Rerum Novarum*, however, Leo XIII, called them "sacred," perhaps to emphasize their importance at a time when socialism threatened to abolish them.

e. *That in my "enthusiasm" for capitalism I romanticize it, denying its many sins, faults, limitations, and omissions:* What I like about democracy and capitalism is that neither is romantic; both are poor systems, except that all known others are worse. Regarding these are two distinct objects of inquiry: the system's own ideals and its actual empirical record, flaws and all. Most leftists simply deny that democracy plus capitalism *has* any moral ideals, equivalent to socialist or social democratic ideals. This is false. It has such goals, and its goals are superior to, not equivalent to, those of social democracy and socialism.

On empirical matters, Rourke merely trots out a too-long series of charges from left-wing, anticapitalist tracts with which all of us have been familiar for years (Barnet and Cavanaugh, Larson and Skidmore, Dorrien). Most, if not all, are false. If we had space I would dispute them empirically. Yet, suppose that all of these charges *were* true. Suppose that serious reforms in capitalist practice are necessary, precisely in the light of democratic capitalist as well as Catholic ideals.

Does history show that the existing alternatives to democratic capitalism—a socialist regime, a traditional third world regime—better raise up the poor? A system of the democratic and capitalist type has systemic ways of prompting and executing reforms that its historical alternatives decidedly lack. That is why despite its faults it continues to prevail—and to be reformed.

f. *That I "reduce the common good in economic matters to the opportunity to compete for individual goods."* But capitalism cannot thrive without a constitutional political order and a moral order of a specific humanistic type; without rules, laws, common understandings, and common virtues; and without specific sets of institutions, practices, and tacit understandings. All these are crucial elements of the common good. So also are roads, bridges, harbors, airports, sewage systems, sources of pure drinking water, venture capital funds, cheap and easy access to institutions of credit, patent and copyright laws, and many other public goods. I suggest (*Free Persons and the Common Good*, p. 181) that the reader reflect on a long list of the public elements of the common good proposed by Maritain, and try to add to it. The view Rourke attributes to me is in fact repulsive to me.

In summary, throughout his discussion of my work, Rourke confuses my position with that of a *laissez-faire*, libertarian, secular nihilist. The shame is on him.

Both he and I have too much creative work to do. Where he finds I fall short, let him carry our mutual project further, and do it better.