

Scientism, Certitude, and the Recovery of Politics

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In *Natural Law and Human Rights*, Pierre Manent begins his analysis of the contemporary political situation by discussing the intractable tension between the relativism surrounding moral action and the absolutism surrounding “human rights.” Later, drawing heavily from Aristotle’s *Politics*, Manent discusses the necessity of a command–obey structure to resolve the tension such that human beings can fruitfully engage in political life. These two claims, one about the tension between relativism and absolutism and the other about the command–obey structure, are closely linked. If it is true that human beings have an innate need for authority, then it is also the case that the extreme abuses of that need, as they manifest themselves in the political realm, will be either wholesale embrace of such authority (absolutism) or wholesale rejection (relativism). We should be clear that the authority Manent discusses is not arbitrary or autocratic exercise of power, but a legitimate authority towards which citizens can offer rational assent. But any human need or desire can be abused and knowledge of the abuses is necessary to understand the proper object.

It is the contention of this piece that Manent, in his explication of command–obey, wrote better than he knew. Manent authored his text before the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, his analysis provides some of the best explanatory power for understanding the politics surrounding COVID. This politics has significance that transcends the particular crisis of the pandemic and merits serious attention. Specifically, Manent’s analysis of the human need for a command–obey structure both offers an explanation for the concurrent tension between relativism and absolutism, at least as it pertains to the relationship between science and politics, and gives explanatory

power for the rise of scientism in contemporary society. The widespread conception that the natural sciences have the potential to answer questions that reside out of their proper purviews leads to abuses of authority in both directions, by both sides—the political left and political right. I will flesh out my argument first by showing the usefulness of Manent’s analysis for explaining how easily so many in the United States fall prey to a false conception of “science” that undermines a healthy politics and reveals, at root, a dangerous aversion to ambiguity. I will then explain the implications of the elevation of scientism for the relationship between politics and Christianity. I will conclude with some reflections on the common good and the future of politics in the United States given Manent’s important observations. I anticipate that a common criticism of Manent’s book will be that it lacks clear prescriptions for the political problems that ail us. I will argue that clear prescriptions cannot follow from the logic of Manent’s argument, and ultimately that the lack of prescription is one of the strengths of the book.

Before I begin, I wish to make two qualifications. First, Manent’s argument ultimately is about the (un)tenability of liberalism without some common conception of the good. He treats several moral and political problems in his book that fall outside of the scope of this short paper. I am not attempting in the analysis that follows to reduce the moral scope of Manent’s claims or even to take up the mantle of his argument. I simply wish to show how his analysis is helpful in explaining a contemporary political problem and how the implications of this analysis should affect the way Christians think about political practice in the United States. Second, I want to make clear at the outset that I positively wish to avoid a discussion about the various policies enacted as responses to COVID-19. I also want to avoid any cavalier political discussion of COVID that does not sufficiently respect the over one million persons (given the latest CDC tally) who have lost their lives in this country and the hardships that many more have endured due to the pandemic. It is essential for our purposes here though to treat the political significance of the pandemic. I will attempt to do that now.

The Appeal of Scientism

Numerous thinkers have chronicled the rise of scientism. Charles Taylor, following Max Weber, writes about the “disenchantment” of the modern world and how the ability of science to offer causal explanations led to a decline of an older viewpoint.¹ Augusto del Noce neatly summarizes how the

¹ See, e.g., Charles Taylor, “Disenchantment-Reenchantment,” in *Dilemmas and*

modern predilection for scientific knowledge is linked to its apparent certitude: “Every other type of knowledge—metaphysical or religious—expresses only ‘subjective reactions,’ which we are able, or will be able, to explain by extending science to the human sphere through psychological and sociological research.”² These articulations are helpful, but Manent’s contribution to this previously trodden ground is a compelling historical and psychological account of modern political thought that indirectly explains the rise of scientism in such a way that directly bears on concerns of political practice.

Manent identifies Niccolo Machiavelli as the figure who ushers in modern political philosophy through his attempt to use speculative principle, rather than practical reason, to direct human political affairs.³ This bucks against a common narrative that one of the touchstones of modernity is the elevation of the practical and the demise of the speculative. Manent claims that the reduction of the four Aristotelian causes to the efficient cause and the reduction of the human person to an individual-*conatus* belongs to a hypertrophy of the theoretical over the practical: “In any case, whether one prefers to speak of physics or of metaphysics to designate the field to which the notion of individual-*conatus* belongs, what is constant is that it belongs to a theoretical discipline, that it derives from theoretical science.”⁴ Manent turns a common narrative about ancient versus modern thought on its head not only by suggesting that modern thought elevates the speculative rather than the practical, but also by arguing that the proper dichotomy by which we consider the divide is not “idealism” (ancient) versus “realism” (modern). He argues, employing Machiavelli for evidence, that the modern political project proceeds not by looking at things “as they are” (realism), but by removing from our picture of the world the element of human action—that is, the political element. The apparent benefit of such a maneuver is to remove ambiguity from the political equation.

We can already see how Manent’s account of Machiavelli and the elevation of the speculative sheds light on the manner in which we utilize natural science in our practice of politics. The foregoing analysis shows that there are two reasons, rather than one, why people turn to science for answers in the

Connections: Selected Essays (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2014), 287–302.

² Augusto del Noce, “Toward a New Totalitarianism,” in *The Crisis of Modernity*, trans. Carlo Lancellotti (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 89.

³ Here, Manent follows the lead of Leo Strauss; see Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?,” In *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (1959; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 9–55.

⁴ Pierre Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, trans. Ralph C. Hancock (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 20.

midst of pandemic: first, they turn to science because certain of its branches, for example, biology and epidemiology, are the fields that most competent to learn about the virus, stem its spread, and develop a vaccine. Second, people turn to science because they want to have faith in something that is sure. Using natural science as a stand-in for the practice of politics elevates the speculative so as to avoid the messiness of the practical. Machiavelli's political strategy seems to have become engrained in the modern psyche. This should come as no surprise since contract theory, as Manent points out, is premised on the promise of security.

The authority of scientific methodology is strong and for good reason. The advances in technology and medicine that we enjoy are testaments to its ability to improve our lives. It clearly offers us a most appealing option for a sense of security. But there is a problem: politics does not offer the same kind of certainty as mathematical science, but mathematical science is simply not equipped to solve political problems. No matter how much knowledge we accumulate about any virus, the successful scientific methodologies that lead to such knowledge are not able to make the value judgments or prudential decisions that politics demands. To be sure, scientific expertise should guide political decision making, but very rarely are there clear-cut answers in political decision making. A recent case study on "policymaker ignorance" points out the inherent difficulties of non-expert lawmakers legislating for the common good.⁵ The study argues that a whole host of considerations need to be considered in policymaking: physical health, psychological health, economic impact, and so on. The study is certainly a balanced attempt to evaluate COVID policy. However, the essential point to keep in mind is that, even if a policymaker possesses all of the data points for every possible area of concern, he or she will still have to make a prudential decision about the common good that will necessitate compromise and an imperfect solution. Scientific methodology simply cannot change the nature of political decision making. It may be the case that policymakers are non-experts in many areas, but the true statesman is the person who is a master of political prudence and possesses the necessary courage to make political decisions. Thus, the public-health official can never replace the statesman. The former must advise and use expertise to ensure that the statesman is informed, but it is the latter who is deputed to make prudential decisions for the common good taking the particular contributions of experts as elements for consideration. As Manent further explains the developments

⁵ Scott Scheall and Parker Crutchfield, "A Case Study in the Problem of Policymaker Ignorance: Political Responses to COVID-19," *Cosmos + Taxis* 9, no. 5 + 6 (2021): 18–28.

in political thinking from Machiavelli, the appeal of scientism in our current political climate becomes even more clear.

In Thomas Hobbes, Manent argues, the elevation of the speculative over the practical develops into a science of command whereby the sovereign concerns himself with the maintenance of political order. Since the human being is understood as an individual-*conatus* rather than a political animal, it must be assumed that all obedience is repugnant and the sovereign must find a way to coerce people to obey who have no reason to obey.⁶ If we are born in freedom removed from obligations, any obligation is seen as an imposition. Conversely, Manent's conception of command-obey draws from Aristotle's treatment of the citizen in *Politics*. Aristotle begins developing the language of command-obey as it pertains to the citizen in book 1, but his clearest articulation of the principle comes in book 3:

There is a rule of another kind, which is exercised over freemen and equals by birth—a constitutional rule, which the ruler must learn by obeying, as he would learn the duties of a general of cavalry by being under the orders of a general of cavalry, or the duties of a general of infantry by being under the orders of a general of infantry, and by having had the command of a regiment and of a company. It has been well said that “he who has never learned to obey cannot be a good commander.” The two are not the same, but the good citizen ought to be capable of both; he should know how to govern like a freeman, and how to obey like a freeman—these are the virtues of a citizen.⁷

Whereas for Hobbes obedience has been rent from any robust concept of civic participation or rational exercise—the commander coerces and the coerced obey—for Manent the elements of rational obedience and shared governance are essential for the command-obey structure. In the act of ruling and being ruled, the citizen learns the art of self-rule which equips him or her to participate well in civic society.

What concerns us most here are the suggestions about human nature. If human beings are rational animals and political animals, then the desire to share in ruling and being ruled qua rational animal is innate.⁸ We have already seen how one abuse of this natural desire can lead to a kind of

⁶ Manent, *Natural Law*, 60.

⁷ Aristotle, *Politics* 3.4.1277b., trans. Benjamin Jowett, classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.3.three.html.

⁸ We should note that Manent extends this political nature more widely than Aristotle, who posits the existence of natural slaves in the first book of the *Politics*.

absolutism: when one embraces wholesale the authority of the apparent certitude of natural science which promises to remove the uncertain from political life. But the tendency to the other extreme of relativism comes into view when we consider the task of the human person in being ruled.

As we pointed out earlier, obeying “like a freeman” does not mean submission to autocratic authority, but rather a rational submission to legitimate authority. With the advent of the digital age and the widespread dissemination of news, the failures of institutions and those who run them are much more publicized. If one is to be called “elite,” or placed in a position of authority, one has to be able to live up to the title.⁹ When citizens witness those in positions of authority overstepping the bounds of their competency, inconsistently enforcing policy that has been laid down with a certain air of moral certitude, or repeatedly changing policy that was supposedly based on objective knowledge, many will revolt against the authority. In our present age of social media, the failure of authority on these counts is much more visible to the public eye.¹⁰ Ironically, the substitution of the apparently certain scientific methodology for the messier prudential decision making of the political art actually undermines authority in the long run because of its necessary failure to deliver on its own terms.

Concerning the extreme factions, we have, on the one hand, a group of people who either know or intuit the limitations of science and so react against those who conflate the certitude of mathematical science with political practice. The problem is that often this group will use this realization to deny science any and all authority in political decision making. We have, on the other hand, a group of people who demonize and dismiss out of hand those who would raise true political questions as being “anti-science” because of a desire for safety and security in political decision making that is simply not possible. At its roots, this tension between a form of relativism and a form of absolutism is closely connected to the contemporary lack of a true command–obey structure as described by Manent.

Science, Christianity, and the Recovery of Politics

The appeal of scientism is real, but it does not limit itself to the natural sciences. In the pluralistic cultural landscape that is ours, it can be tempting to trot out various “systems,” philosophical or theological, that offer complete

⁹ See José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: Norton, 1994).

¹⁰ The effect of the digital age on authority and its political ramifications is treated by Martin Gurri, *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium* (San Francisco: Stripe, 2018).

and apparently compelling interpretations of reality in the midst of cultural confusion. This is to fall unwittingly into the Machiavellian mentality of elevating the speculative so as to avoid the messiness of politics, of replacing practical reason with the application of formulas.¹¹ If the political pitfall of our time is to fall into patterns of ideological thinking, rather than to engage in the practice of politics, Christians have to offer something other than a baptized ideology as leaven for society. After at least three centuries of decline, the fall of Christendom is complete. Christians must do better than merely assert a type of authority, either political or theological, that is no longer adequate for our contemporary challenges.¹²

Thomas Smith has written about this very problem: “Religious believers have to think about politics in much wider horizons. We have to wrestle with our political pathologies not simply by figuring out the right policy or which party or candidate is ‘the most Christian.’ We have to ask much more fundamental questions.”¹³ Smith goes on to argue that the neoliberal regime perpetually defers the essential question of politics: “What is the good?” Since the deferral is no longer politically expedient, Christian political actors have to make explicit claims about the good life: what it is and how we should pursue it.¹⁴ And, as I will argue below, we are required not only to articulate conceptions of the good life on an intellectual level, but also to show what the good life looks like through our actions.

The corollary of this injunction to raise questions about the good, given the pluralistic nature of our regime in which Christianity is no longer given a preferred seat at the proverbial table, is that we have to be willing both to walk into a room recognizing the existence of a complex array of competing

¹¹ Benedict XVI is very careful to make the distinctions that so many who adopt scientism fail to make: religion’s role in politics is “to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles” rather than to supply the objective norms governing right action, or “still less to propose concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion” (“The Ethical Foundations of Political Choices: The Speech in Westminster Hall (September 17, 2010),” in *Faith and Politics: Selected Writings*, trans. Michael J. Miller and others [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018], 152–58).

¹² For an excellent sociological account of the breakdown of the mainline Protestant consensus in the United States and the subsequent failure of Catholics and evangelicals to fill the void with natural law reasoning, see Joseph Bottum, *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (New York: Crown, 2014).

¹³ Thomas Smith, “Politics Without the Fall?,” *Church Life Journal*, June 9, 2021, churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/politics-without-the-fall/.

¹⁴ See V. Bradley Lewis, “Is the Common Good Obsolete?,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 92 (2018): 261–70.

goods and to make compromises, recognizing the trade-offs that come with true political practice. The fundamental Christian political insight, best explicated by Augustine in *City of God*, is that politics has inherent limitations and that, therefore, Christians should moderate their expectations of what politics can deliver. Moderating expectations does not in any way weaken our mandate to show our fellow citizens the good, but it should prevent us from falling prey to any ideology that promotes oversimplified and clean-cut political solutions. This insight may be a boring one, but it is nonetheless one that, when ignored, always leads to bad consequences.

If the first way a mentality of scientism can insert itself into the Christian practice of politics is through an intellectual over-reliance on speculative reason to the detriment of practical reason, a second danger manifests itself in allowing our actual practice of politics to become abstracted. This seemingly paradoxical practice is made possible through network news and social media. I contend that the practice of politics should take focus in our local communities and with our neighbors. Yet, since so much of our political engagement takes place through the internet, it becomes easy to privilege the national over the local. More importantly, political engagement over social media does not lend itself to citizens thoughtfully engaging other flesh-and-blood individuals.¹⁵ Rather, social media makes it all too easy for the user to identify himself or herself as well as the opposition with an abstract public. Such “engagement” usually leads to feelings of anger, or even, in certain cases, feelings of acceptance and community. But these emotions are completely detached from any real human engagement. They are no substitute for the arguments that once took place in the town hall or the community building, at the bowling alley and in the church. They cannot count as authentic political practice because they do nothing to promote or strengthen the neighborly bonds that are essential to political community. Christians now, more than ever, should take as their first political principle the building up of their local communities.

Of course, this is more easily said than done. Both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, while expressing approval for a pluralistic political society, have also pointed out the necessity of common principles for political discourse. Benedict, on multiple occasions, signaled his belief that the two main dialogue partners in contemporary society are Christian faith and

¹⁵ Augustine’s critique of the theatre in book 3 of the *Confessions* is very instructive here. I have made this argument in a popular piece: “On Some Problems with Political Discourse,” *McGrath Institute for Church Life* (blog), October 8, 2020, mcgrathblog.nd.edu/on-some-problems-with-political-discourse.

Western secular rationality.¹⁶ But he voices his serious concern that religion, in the name of reason, is often marginalized in political dialogue.¹⁷ Francis has suggested that human dignity offers the best hope for a shared political premise.¹⁸ While dignity originated as a distinctly Christian concept, and does represent a common value between many, believers and non, it is also now used to justify euthanasia. I am not completely confident that our post-Christian values, stripped of their Christian roots, will be able to sustain themselves.¹⁹ But the prospect of political success is not the primary motivation of the Christian. Rather, it falls to us to strive for union with the living God and to model for our fellow citizens that communion which is most properly the object of our desire, not by trying to exercise authority that no longer holds sway, by proposing abstract moral systems as solutions to political problems, or by engaging in political debates removed from real human contact, but by living the truth. N·V

¹⁶ See, e.g., Benedict XVI, “Reason and Faith for a Common Ethics: A Dialogue with Jürgen Habermas (January 19, 2004),” in *Faith and Politics*, 182–95, esp. 195.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, “Reason and Faith,” 194–95, and “Ethical Foundations,” 156.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), §211.

¹⁹ Perhaps the best arguments supporting such skepticism can be found in David Bentley Hart, “Reaction and Retreat: Modernity and the Eclipse of the Human,” part 4 in *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).