

A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE TWO STANDARDS

Patrick Riordan

THE MEDITATION on the Two Standards in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius is a helpful step for exercitants on the way towards making a life-shaping decision. They are faced with the questions *where do I wish to place myself? Where do I desire to be? Where is God calling me to be?* This meditation comes on the fourth day in the Second Week, along with other exercises that are structured to help focus the decision. The meditation on the Kingdom frames the transition from the First to the Second Week, and sets the context for the choice of a state of life. Another exercise on the same day as the Two Standards is the meditation on the Three Classes of Men; later the reflection on the Three Kinds of Humility also aids the choice.

It is important not to lose sight of this context when reflecting on the Two Standards. The context is choice, the decision exercitants are to make about their state of life, or something comparably serious. I stress this, so that my specific perspective from political philosophy is not misunderstood. I acknowledge the relevance of the Two Standards to discernment as the activity of interpreting the movements experienced by the exercitant with a view to clarifying the features of a freedom to make a decision. There is of course a wider relevance of discernment in life, and that provides the context for this exploration.

From the perspective of the political, what interest might there be in analyzing the Two Standards? There are two at least that spring to mind.

1. The reliance on an imaginative narrative that has resonances, both theological and political, and which shapes the mindset of the decision-maker and, possibly, also the mindsets of directors and preachers formed by the Exercises.
2. In the narrative of the Two Standards there is use of rhetorical structures that have parallels in political argument. How are we to understand those parallels?

My discussion attempts to link the Two Standards, the tasks of discernment and reflections from political philosophy.

Political Structures

The Kingdom

The Kingdom meditation has specific political aspects. First we note that there is a king, and there are subjects. In both cases on which the exercitant is invited to reflect, the human king and the eternal King, the king's project is deemed good and worthwhile, and in both cases the relationship between king and subject is one of invitation, or summons. 'Whoever wishes to come with me ...' (Exx 93, 95) Here there is no mention of 'bad' subjects. All subjects are good, but there is a distinction between the good subjects who have 'judgment and reason', and those more ambitious good subjects who wish to give greater proof of their love and who wish to distinguish themselves in service (Exx 96, 97). The focus in the comparison is on the Eternal King and Lord and the exercitants' desire to offer themselves in service. But the basic political model is one of monarchy, with a hierarchy of ruler and subject.

Secondly, both the human king and the eternal King formulate their project in the militaristic terms of conquest. They wish to conquer land, world, enemies. There is no doubt that this imaginary is conditioned by the times and by Ignatius' own personal history. I am not objecting to these images: I acknowledge they have scriptural bases, and also that the struggle required is to conquer one's 'carnal and worldly love' (Exx 97) in 'bearing all injuries and affronts, and any poverty, actual as well as spiritual' (Exx 98). The question is whether there is an unintended framing of experience consequent on use of these images.

The Two Standards Meditation

Given its title, we might expect the images here also to be both monarchical and military. A standard is a flag, a visible focus of attention around which soldiers on the battlefield can regroup. But in this narrative, it is not the commonality but the contrast between the two that is emphasized.

To Satan are assigned the features of a nasty monarch, more the tyrant than the king in Aristotle's classification.¹ For Aristotle, the distinction

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 3.7, translated by T. A. Sinclair (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

is drawn in terms of whether rule is exercised for the common good (king) or for the good of the ruler (tyrant). I will return to this theme later. Satan has a throne; his appearance inspires horror and terror (Exx 140). This feature also makes him more like the sovereign of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, who must inspire terror and awe in his subjects.² Satan's project is deceptive, entrapment leading to bondage in chains for all.

By contrast, 'the supreme and true leader, who is Christ our Lord' (Exx 143) has none of the trappings of monarchy in this depiction. He is in a lowly place, appears attractive and speaks to his followers, who are described as 'his servants and friends' (Exx 146). The narrative of the Kingdom meditation is replaced with another in which there is no longer any mention of conquest or domination. Instead the project is 'to spread his doctrine' among all persons of whatever status (Exx 145). The emissaries are to help all by attracting people to the way of Christ (poverty, contempt, humility). The contrast is marked: invitation by way of attraction, implying that the response must be freely and knowingly given.

Biblical Resonances

Biblical sources contain many uses of a similar polarisation: choose life or death; choose liberty or bondage; light or darkness. These contrasts are familiar from the passages such as those in Deuteronomy on covenant ratification.

Paul's mission was set in the context of the Roman empire, which recognised its *kyrios*, Caesar, as absolute sovereign. Paul proclaimed a different *Kyrios*, inevitably a challenge to the dominance of Caesar and recognised as such by those who opposed Paul. Tom Wright describes it like this, interestingly for our reflection:

People who were used to one kind of political reality, albeit with its own history and variations, were glimpsing a vision of a larger united though diverse world When the new communities spoke of a different *Kyrios*, one whose sovereignty was gained through humility and suffering rather than through wealth and conquest, many must have found that attractive, not simply for what we would call 'religious' reasons, but precisely for what they might call 'political' ones.³

² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), edited by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford U, 1996).

³ Tom Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (London: SPCK, 2018), 423.



The Temptation of Christ, by Hans Thoma, 1890

The polarisation of the two Lords, Caesar and Jesus, is signalled in Luke's Gospel. The Gospel begins (2:1) with the decree of Caesar Augustus that a census of the whole world be taken, and it ends with the commission of Jesus to his disciples that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached to all nations in his name (24:47). The story moves from the emperor's command affecting the whole world to the Lord's commission to preach to the whole world. This confrontation between two 'Lords' is further documented in Acts and in Paul's own writings.

Augustine's Two Cities

Ignatius' contrast between the Two Standards has an obvious resonance with Augustine's contrast between the earthly city and the City of God.⁴ This is an explicit elaboration of the political significance of the revelation in Jesus occasioned by the disputes over the theological interpretation of the fall of Rome in 410. Augustine contrasts two cities, each of which satisfies a standard definition of city as a society of rational beings united in pursuit of a common love. The earthly city is founded on the love of personal glory and the pursuit of self-interest; the city of God is founded on the love of God's glory and the desire to serve.

The resonances here with the Two Standards are obvious. There are two standards or programmes: on the one side, pride and self-serving engagement; on the other side, humility and service of God and neighbour.

⁴ See Augustine, *City of God*, translated by Henry Bettenson, edited by David Knowles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

While the earthly city exhibits the same love among its members, it cannot be called a common good, since each one's glory or interest is particular to the individual and indeed they are often in conflict. What is common is only a sameness, the same kind of orientation, but not a shared, common orientation. In the City of God, a genuine common good unites the members of the ordered society since each one desires and pursues the same good as every other. Augustine's analysis is explicitly political as it draws attention to the manner in which these two cities, founded on contrasted loves, are intertwined or intermixed within any political community in history, including the Church itself. But he is also existential in his challenge to his audience to have their own loves clarified and where possible to allow the love of self-glory to be replaced by love of God and pursuit of God's glory.

Political Argumentation

Satan's Strategy

The plan of action attributed to the satanic figure is one of deception leading to entrapment, playing on the interests that people are assumed to have. Ignatius spells out the steps of the strategy, from possession to honours to pride. Covetousness is the starting vice leading to pride, from which all other vices can be acquired.

The strategy attributed to Satan is not one of argument in the normal sense but much more one of manipulation. It may appear in the form of argument or persuasion, using language and relevant words and images, but at heart it is deceptive because it conceals from the addressee what is going on and what exactly is the aim. Note that Satan addresses his innumerable demons, not their targets or victims. The strategy of deception and entrapment, from covetousness to pride, is communicated to the tempters, but not to the tempted. The victims should not be aware of the strategy applied to them, since in that case it might not work.

J. L. Mackie is one of a number of thinkers who reconstruct ethics as an instrument of social control, regulating the actions of people who pose threats to one another but who by accepting the regulation of moral norms manage to live together without doing much harm.⁵

⁵ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

Mackie follows Hobbes and Hume in denying that there is anything true about value statements (for Hobbes whatever people happen to desire they call good; but there is nothing good or bad in itself).⁶ So, the social construct of morality is illusory, and recognised as such by those who study the matter, but the population in general should continue to live under the illusion so that they conform to social norms instead of disrupting the social order.

Jürgen Habermas also offers us an interesting resonance with the rhetoric of the Two Standards. He contrasts different styles of political argument. Beyond the sheer appeal to authority—do it because I tell you—there can be the giving of reasons, but the reasons in turn can be distinguished by type. One set of reasons is grouped as ‘strategic’. With these reasons those addressed are reminded of the currencies of property and power. Money and political influence are the main currencies. *Where is the pay-off? What do I stand to gain or lose?*⁷

What is objectionable in these arguments is not that they encourage wrongdoing as such; instead, it is that they make goods that are primarily instrumental into the ultimate ends of action. To the extent that they colonise our consciousness, they drown out attention to matters of more ultimate concern, such as the questions Aristotle raised in the same context, challenging the identification of money or reputation or power with *eudaimonia*: what do we want to use the wealth for, what will we want to do with our power?⁸

Christ's Approach

In both the Kingdom and the Two Standards the eternal King is presented as offering something good to which those addressed are invited. The good in question is deemed to be attractive, such that those who recognise it (having reason and judgment) will desire it, and those who are more ambitious will be ever more willing to accept the necessary steps for attaining their desire. The point of contrast is not desire, but the nature of what is attractive and therefore desired.

⁶ ‘But whatsoever is the object of any man’s appetite or desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth good For these words ... are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves.’ (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 6. 7)

⁷ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, translated by Thomas McCarthy, 2 volumes (Boston, Ma: Beacon, 1981).

⁸ See Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1.5, translated by J. A. K. Thompson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981). *Eudaimonia*, sometimes translated simply as ‘happiness’, signifies well-being, or the living of a good life.

Another point of contrast between Christ and Satan is that the dynamic of communication from Christ to his messengers to their audience does not require deception but the very opposite: transparency and openness. The friends and servants of the King are charged to attract their audience to poverty, insults and humility. These can only appear attractive when situated in the greater, broader narrative of Christ, his life, death and resurrection, and promised parousia. As in the Kingdom meditation, there is no concealment of the costs of discipleship and there is no pretence of a romantic kind about the steps to be taken in following Christ.

There is no concealment of the costs of discipleship

As Habermas's 'strategic reason' provided us with a modern exemplar of the seductions of wealth and power as motivations for political actors, he offers also a parallel to the persuasive attractiveness of the Eternal King's message. Communicative action, which is orientated towards reaching a mutual understanding (*Verständigung*) is contrasted with strategic action, which is orientated towards success. Strategic action involves the application of a means-goal technical rationality to social affairs, such that social actors seek success over rational opponents with competing interests. This is the type of social rationality which lies at the basis of liberal and utilitarian theories of society, according to Habermas. It can be seen to be limited, in contrast to the rationality of communicative action. I emphasize here that I am not identifying Satan's rhetoric with Habermas's strategic reason: the former leads to evil and wrongdoing; the latter has a perfectly positive purpose that can be correctly fulfilled. The element in common is that they both address the sources of people's interests in their desires to have and to be more.

The fact that strategic action is always mediated by language allows Habermas to apply his argument as a form of immanent critique, namely, that strategic argumentation does not conform to those norms and rules of discourse which are already presupposed and affirmed as valid in the very act of entering into argument. In his elaboration of communicative action and of a society founded on its basis, Habermas specifies requirements for the communication that should take place. Essentially, it should be coercion-free; none should be excluded, and all ideas and interests should have access.⁹

⁹ See Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 1, *Reason and the Rationalisation of Society*.

Habermas's distinction between communicative and strategic rationality offers a parallel in political philosophy to the contrast drawn by Ignatius in his narrative of the Two Standards, and the respective speeches made by their representatives. His approach provides us with a perspective on their different objectives: success or agreement. The goal aimed at by Satan and his demons is that all people be led to all the vices, for which pride is the key. This qualifies as the success comparable to what is aimed at by the implementation of strategic reason. The mission given by the eternal King is that all humankind would receive 'his doctrine' (Exx 145); the method to be employed is to attract by displaying the beauty and goodness of what is proposed. No coercion is envisaged, no deception or manipulation; only a free response to the invitation is sought. This is comparable to the *Verständigung* or agreement by way of mutual understanding that is the goal of communicative action in Habermas's analysis.

Noteworthy in this context is the significant commitment of Vatican Council II's Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis humanae* (nn.4, 10), that the Church would never rely on coercion or on the application of state power to achieve its mission of evangelization. The importance of the Declaration is due to the ambivalent history of the Church's reliance on state power with its coercive instruments. Accepting the abandonment of the Papal States in the twentieth century and Pope John Paul II's prohibition of clergy accepting official political roles marked significant practical steps in realising this doctrine.

Another point of contrast is available if we draw on Augustine's distinction between the two cities founded on two loves, and his point



Effects of Good Government in the City, from *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*, by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, 1338–1339

that only one city exemplifies true unity because it alone has a genuine common good. What are the goods at stake in the two social movements represented by the Two Standards? In that of Satan there is no true communality but only sameness, as each is led by greed and pride to pursue his or her own interests. But in the case of the Eternal King all the emissaries have the same end and it embraces the free adoption by their audience of the same sacred doctrine, drawn by its intrinsic attractiveness. This end has the features of a genuine good in common, one that is both fulfilling of the persons who pursue it together and is a genuinely worthwhile goal of human action. It is a community bonded by holding the same convictions and commitments to the same goods.

Discernment, the Two Standards and Political Analysis

Although I began by drawing attention to the presupposed structures in the Kingdom and Two Standards narratives, and then focused on the contrasting forms of argument or rhetoric depicted, this analysis leads us to acknowledge that the structures of kingship and the militaristic notions of conquest are subverted by the manner of attraction and persuasion employed by the Eternal King. There is an operative internal critique of these images in the transition from the Kingdom meditation to the meditation on the Two Standards. It is as if those having 'judgment and reason' who wish 'to show greater devotion' and to 'distinguish themselves in total service' are led through the meditations to recognise what would count as proof of love and as distinguished service.

The noble-spirited soul may have imagined feats of daring and courage acknowledged in battlefield honours. But from the Two Standards the discovery is made that distinguished service must be without expectation of recognition, and indeed with the expectation of receiving the opposite—contempt—and that grasping for distinction is no less unworthy than grasping for wealth. This subversion and critique is achieved, it is to be hoped, in the exercitant via the depiction of the contrasting rhetorics of Satan and the Eternal King.

In constructing this dynamic Ignatius has both built on and contributed to a philosophical tradition of political reflection. Apart from the sources in Aristotle, one might recall the narrative at the very beginning of Plato's *Republic* where Socrates finds himself constrained

to remain with the friends he has met, despite his preference for returning to Athens (the city representing reason in contrast to the Piraeus, the port, representing the chaos of desires). They force him (with threats, however wittily offered), and he offers to persuade them; but that will not work, they say, if they refuse to listen. The irony is that they do listen, and are persuaded, and their raging appetites are calmed, although it takes a whole night of talking and listening. This is the fundamental dialectic at the heart of social and political order. Persuasion, not coercion, is the source of agreement.

Bernard Crick, among others, has elaborated a view of politics derived from an Aristotelian approach that builds on this contrast between coercion and persuasion.¹⁰ Not everything that appears as talking qualifies as persuasion in the relevant sense, since threats and manipulation can appear in the form of argument. And so, Crick and many others have attempted to elaborate on the forms of political argument that can avoid oppression, domination, subjugation or any form of manipulation. Alas, none satisfactorily meets the challenge posed by Ignatius in his construction of the dynamic of progress in discipleship.

Indeed some commentators, such as Habermas, acknowledge the challenge and the problem. Argument, as a purely rational activity, cannot change fundamental desires and the orientation of the heart. Failing to persuade while relying on communicative rationality, proponents of the good are tempted to resort to strategic rationality, relying on the assumption that there are basic desires that everyone will have, for resources (wealth), for status (honour) and power. And so, what begins as an attempt at persuasion becomes colonised by the dynamics of strategic rationality.¹¹ A rational appeal to assumed pre-existent desires and associated interests cannot be an effective pathway to changing those desires and interests or relativising them for higher purposes. The First Principle and Foundation highlights the assumption on the basis of which the dynamic of the Exercises can work in addressing desires: 'we ought to desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created' (Exx 23).

¹⁰ Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).

¹¹ This notion of colonisation is key to Habermas's critique, and might be useful for nuancing Pope Francis's criticism of the 'technocratic paradigm' in *Laudato si'*. Strategic reason and action can be perfectly good and well used in relevant contexts: the dangers arise when they colonise contexts in which a different rationality is appropriate.

The activity of politics, understood as based on a commitment to managing and handling conflict by talking rather than coercion, presupposes the willingness of parties in conflict to die to self. Without recognising the truth of the message of the cross as integrated in the lives of individuals and communities, there could be no genuine politics, I maintain. This is because politics requires a willingness to let go of prized desires and interests.

Politics ... is an admirable human achievement. It is also precarious, since there are many pressures, especially on those who are stronger, either in military terms or in terms of numbers, to rely on their greater power to achieve their interests. Resistance to those pressures requires not only a valuing of the human achievement of politics, but also a self-discipline in mastery of emotional responses and immediacy of interests.¹²

Politics requires of conflicting interest groups that they are sufficiently distanced from their own interests and preferences that they can allow them to be subjected to rigorous assessment and demand for justification. Transcending one's subjectivity in such a manner is a form of dying to oneself. Accordingly, I argue that the invitation to take up one's cross entails an invitation to be political, to let go of self-preference and of group-preference and be willing to compromise.

I have sketched the way in which the Two Standards illuminates a significant exigency for politics as communicative action (Habermas) or the commitment to manage conflict by talking (Crick). At the same time, the Two Standards, along with the whole Christian message, challenges politics to face its limitations at the level of its preconditions in challenging the conversion of desires and interests. If political actors were to face this challenge, they would need to engage in discernment as part of the striving for freedom that is a prerequisite for good decisions.

If we consider discernment as an activity of knowing, typically in the context of an individual or a community making a decision or facing the prospect of having to choose a course of action, we can note the multiple objects to be known. These can be distinguished into

¹² Patrick Riordan, 'The Language of Politics and the Language of the Cross', in *Talking of Conflict: Christian Reflections in the Context of Israel and Palestine*, edited by Jane Clements (Leicester: Matador, 2012), 64–85, here 83.

exterior and interior objects. The exterior objects are those matters of needs, opportunities, resources, conditions and circumstances with which we have to deal. The interior objects are the desires, spiritual motions, unfreedoms, biases and prejudices of the persons and groups involved in the discernment. This distinction is not intended to imply separation: a chooser's bias of which he is unaware and so renders him unfree to some degree may also cloud his attention and distort his perception of the world around, conditions, opportunities and resources. To make a good decision as to a state of life (*Exercises*) or of a mission to be undertaken by the Society (*Constitutions*) a chooser must undergo a process of discernment, both getting to know the full context relevant to the decision, and becoming aware of the interior resistances and unfreedoms made evident in the spiritual movements experienced as well as the moments of consolation in considering the prospect of the proposed action.

The exploration of resonances between the Spiritual Exercises and political philosophy opens up interesting points of complementarity. The context of each of these discourses reveals a basic communality: it is the need to find an ordering of action and community for the sake of a common good (more universal good), and it is the pathway to appropriate action and order via communication that deliberately seeks the good in freedom by identifying sources of unfreedom and filtering out distortions of knowledge and desire. One fruitful challenge is how basic desires and interests can be revised: if the given is simply to be presupposed, then it seems that politics as communicative action is severely constrained; but if the experience of the Exercises reveals the real possibility of conversion of desires and interests, then communicative action has a chance. In the other direction, there is the possibility of the activity of discernment both at individual and communal level learning from what has been explored and achieved in philosophy about identifying biases and avoiding subtle forms of manipulation.

Patrick Riordan SJ, an Irish Jesuit, is senior fellow in political philosophy and Catholic social thought at Campion Hall, Oxford. Previously he taught political philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London, and at the Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy in Dublin. His most recent book is *Human Dignity and Liberal Politics: Catholic Possibilities for the Common Good* (Georgetown, 2023).