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Luigi Taparelli on the Dignity of Man

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The paper will present a brief overview of Luigi Taparelli's natural law social and political philosophy which he elaborated in response to the intellectual and political crisis of his times. Influenced by both Traditionalist and Eclectic philosophical movements, Taparelli perceived already in the 1820's, as Rector of the Collegio Romano, the pedagogical utility of returning to the principles of scholastic philosophical and theological inquiry. Taparelli built on his appreciation for the scholastic philosophers, and in particular for St. Thomas Aquinas, a Catholic natural law philosophy that could integrate what was tenable from modern social and political thought, while refuting, on both theoretical and practical grounds, its naturalistic errors. His agitation for a renewal of Thomistic philosophy within the Society of Jesus, his work on natural law, and his writings on social, political and economic topics for over 10 years at the *Civiltà Cattolica*, constitute an important early expression of the Thomistic idea of Christian humanism that became the central pillar of Catholic social teaching.

Luigi Taparelli, S.J. (1793-1862) was an outstanding figure in the history of 19th-century Catholic social and political thought by any standard. In the scholarly historical literature, Taparelli is credited with having played a central role in the revival of Thomistic studies, beginning with his tenure as Rector of the newly re-founded *Collegio Romano* in the 1820's, and subsequently, through his influence as the intellectual dean of the group of writers associated with the journal *Civiltà Cattolica*, and ultimately through his students and protégés, on Vatican intellectual circles generally.¹ His magnum opus, the *Theoretical Treatise*

¹ Generally, and for the older bibliography, see the biography of R. Jacquin, *Taparelli* (Paris, 1943); and also, P. Pirri, *Carteggi del P. Luigi Taparelli D'Azeglio* (Torino, 1932). See also, P. Droulers, "Question sociale, Etat, Eglise dans la *Civiltà Cattolica* as ses debuts," in *Chiesa e Stato nell'Ottocento* (Padova, 1962), repr. In *Cattolicesimo sociale nei secoli XIX e XX. Saggi di storia e sociologia* (Roma, 1982); and the studies collected by the Gregorian University, *Miscellanea Taparelli. Raccolta di studi in onore di Luigi Taparelli D'Azeglio, S.J. nel primo centenario della sua morte* (Roma, 1964); and especially, G. De Rosa, "Le origini della *Civiltà Cattolica*," in *Civiltà Cattolica 1850-1945. Antologia* 4 vols. (Firenze, 1973). In English, see T. Behr, "Luigi Taparelli D'Azeglio, S.J. (1793-1862) and the Development of Scholastic Natural Law Thought as a Science of Society and Politics" 5 *Journal of Markets and Morality* (Spring 2003); "Luigi Taparelli's Natural Law Approach to Social Economics" *Journal des Economistes et des Etudes Humaines* (Summer 2003); and, *Luigi Taparelli and the 19th-Century Neo-Scholastic "Revolution" in Natural Law*

on Natural Law Based on Fact, 1840-43, has been kept nearly perpetually in print in Italian, was immediately translated into German, and later into French.² An abridged version for schools also came out in several editions and was translated into French and Spanish. In this major work he sought to harmonize Aristotelico-Thomistic natural law philosophy with what he considered valuable from Enlightenment political theory to provide a coherent theoretical and practical method for analyzing and addressing the developing social, economic, moral-cultural and political questions of his day. Taparelli's turn to Aristotle and the Scholastics allowed him to transcend traditionalist and romantic-conservative reaction, and gave him the conceptual apparatus to explode the fallacies of Cartesian rationalism and its intellectual heirs in the liberal and socialist movements of his day. He argued that the intellectual foundation of liberalism as it stood in the wake of the French Revolution was fatally flawed; but that a *renewed* liberalism, founded on a holistic understanding of human nature and of society, was the best hope for avoiding the descent into moral anarchy and political totalitarianism which he diagnosed as the chief menaces confronting modernity.

In the pursuit of his goal, Taparelli formulated a natural law approach to the science of society, politics and economics that led to some very important concepts that have continued to exercise influence over Catholic social teaching. His formulation of the concept of "social justice" in particular has become a pillar of Catholic doctrine, and yet I think it is fair to say that Taparelli's approach to the principle has not received sufficient attention. For Taparelli, social justice is not a metaphor, nor the extension of virtue language to anthropomorphized collectives. Social justice is distinct from both commutative and distributive justice, and can be stated succinctly thus: a legal order and normative ideal within a society by which individuals and their various associations are given the maximum range of liberty in pursuit of their proper ends, with a minimum of interference from superior authorities, i.e., only to the extent necessary to orient general activity towards the common good, and governed by the principles of conflicting rights, prudence, and, ultimately, of charity. This is not the only way that Taparelli uses the term, but it is arguably the most important of his uses. Moreover, to express this aspect of the principle of social justice Taparelli further developed the concepts of "hypotactical right," (i.e. rights related to individuals and to the various levels of associations "arranged below") which has come to be described in Catholic social doctrine,

and Catholic Social Sciences, Dissertation submitted for the Ph.D., SUNY Buffalo, 2000, currently being considered for publication as *Culture and Liberty: Catholic Liberalism and Natural Law in Luigi Taparelli*. For Taparelli's influence in the development of neo-scholastic theology see, G. McCool, *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism* (New York, 1989).

² *Saggio Teoretico di Dritto Naturale Appoggiato sul Fatto* (orig. Palermo, 1840-43; repr. Roma, 1949, based on the definitive 1855 edition.)

and beyond, in its Latinized form, as the principle of subsidiarity. *Social justice, subsidiarity and solidarity* (“sociality” in Taparelli’s lexicon, an anthropologically corrected borrowing from Pufendorf), combine in a coherent theory of social, material and moral progress culminating, he argued, in a global brotherhood of equal nations (in contradistinction to Kant’s universal government). And these concepts were formulated in the early 1840s, expanded and applied through the 1850s.

In the twelve years of articles appearing in the *Civiltà Cattolica*, from 1850-1862, Taparelli built on his neo-scholastic natural law foundation a serious critique of both the theory and practical implications of radical liberalism and of socialism. And although his work as a publicist for the Papal cause gives, at times, an overly polemical and contingent stamp to his work, it is also true that he was a pioneer and an insightful theoretician of the natural law as the Church struggled to come to grips with the various faces and crises of modernization. Though in his day, Taparelli’s name was hardly associated in the public mind with the cause of liberty and human progress, his critique of the overly abstract principles underlying the claims of secular modernity, has contributed, at least indirectly, to the development of the social doctrine and of a truly Catholic conception of democratic liberalism.³

In the remaining space of this paper, I would like to elaborate some of the issues that Taparelli raised, coming from the perspective of St. Thomas and the Scholastics, with regard to an authentic conception of human liberty, the true source of human dignity. Such issues were at the core of his project to redress the distortions surrounding post-Cartesian philosophy and modern liberal political theory.

Indeed, for Taparelli, one of the starting points of misguided modern thinking about man, nature, and society begins with Descartes’ radical separation of mind from body, reducing the body to dead matter, moved around by a totally extrinsic principle of soul “*rinchiusa nella glandola pineale*.” (ST, Note LVIII) The consequence of this abstraction, having followed Plato in defining man “*tutto quanto nell’animo*,” (ST, 143-144) in Taparelli’s opinion, was a catastrophe for reasoning about human fulfillment and man’s place in society. From autonomy of mind to the social contract of self-legislating individuals is a short step. (ST, Note LIV, 2)

³ Cf., E. Fortin, “From ‘*Rerum Novarum*’ to ‘*Centesimus Annus*’: Continuity of Discontinuity?” in 17 *Faith and Reason* (1991), p. 412ff.; and R. Hittinger, “The Problem of the State in ‘*Centesimus Annus*,’” in 15 *Fordham International Law Journal* (1991-92), p. 952ff.

The dignity of man in the conception of the social contract theorists would seem to reside in the alienation of one's proper liberty in submission to an (illusorily) higher authority, but nonetheless an authority of human invention. An altogether different conception of human dignity derives from a recognition that our social dependence is not a weakness to overcome, but rather part of the design of nature. Human dignity and the liberty proper to man from this perspective are perfected, not in appeal to human abstractions, but in obedience to nature and to its Author. Such an understanding transforms the question of social submission into a "conversation with the Almighty (l'Altissimo)," and places social order, but also human liberty, on the solid foundation "dell'eterna sapienza e dell'Essere necessario." (ST, Note LIV, 3)

Freedom of will is not itself a difficult philosophical issue in Taparelli's view. Once intellect arrives at the idea of infinite good, no limited good can ever exercise itself on the will in a necessary way. (ST, 50) But freedom of will is not the sole condition of the dignity of rational human beings: *ordered* liberty is the source and perfection of human dignity. Ordered, or *just*, liberty can be defined otherwise as the free exercise of the will informed by the intellect, which together constitute the essence of morality, the tendency to the ultimate good and the perfection of man. (ST, 41-46) Confusions over the nature of liberty have arisen largely because of the failure of the modern theorists to recognize that man is social by nature, (ST, 326) and that the "mathematical" necessity (ST, 327) of social existence carries with it moral dimensions for persons.

Proceeding from the first universal principle of morality for persons to "do good" (ST, 314; cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II, Q.94), and from the recognition of the inherent equality of all human beings deriving from our Creator, it is clear that the social dimension of moral perfection coincides with willing others to be able to do good and willing them good—which is tantamount to the same thing. In other words, the social dimension of natural morality is thus "amare altrui come sè stesso." (ST, 314; cf. Note XL) even if the *intensity* of the will towards one's own good, known more directly and clearly, is naturally superior to willing the good of our equals. (ST, 315-316) Confusion over this first moral principle of society arises from materialist anthropologies which equate the good with the pleasurable or the useful. The combined effect of flawed materialist conceptions of human nature and the good, and the modern abstract conceptions of society, considering it as a necessary evil, are the sources of all the modern fallacies in economics and politics on the liberty and dignity of man. Taparelli underlines these distinctions and their consequences at every occasion:

"E questa società, come voi ben vedete, è società necessaria, nata dai principii essenziali della umana natura che sono intelletto tendente ad un Vero unico e volontà tendente ad

un unico Bene. Dal che comprenderete quanto vadano errati quegli utilitarii che la socialità considerano come un mercato di servizi scambievoli... ovvero come una specie di transazione con cui si sacrifica il *minimo* per avere degli altri sussidii coll'intento sempre di far prevalere il proprio interesse." (ST, 319)

Misconceiving both the rational nature of man and the natural order pertaining to society cannot avoid leading rationalistic theorists, such as Hobbes, to nefarious political conclusions. (ST, Note XLII) While Taparelli was quick to admit that the worst implications of rationalistic theorizing were often averted in practice, for the coherent utilitarian, persons end up being regarded as objects and commodities like any other. It would be a rather fragile social and political theory that relied on a safety-valve of persistent incoherence. The internal logic and natural tendency of a society governed from the assumption of radical individual autonomy is an ever greater alienation and degradation of human dignity, culminating, Taparelli foresaw, in totalitarian communism.⁴ And woe to the person whose utility has been exhausted or disregarded! Taparelli foresaw that their very right to life would cease.⁵

The essential dignity of man, from Taparelli's perspective, resides not merely in the satisfaction of animal needs and spontaneous "free" acts of will, but rather first and foremost in the pursuit of justice, the free intellectual apprehension and pursuit of order in truth. And among these first truths is the command of reason to love one another. This is the reason why a human person ought never be regarded as an object or as an instrument for furthering someone else's self-interest: not because they are an end in themselves, but because we all have ends beyond our selves.

To take one prime example to demonstrate the application of Taparelli's approach, there is the very obvious case of slavery. Taparelli's adamant condemnation of slavery, as it was still practiced in some countries, even those calling themselves Christian—like the U.S.—has been misread by some commentators, so it is even a good case to look at as an example of his method and the resulting difficulties in reading him.⁶

Those commentators who suggest that Taparelli supported the idea of slavery as a moral possibility "in the abstract" simply have not read the *Saggio*, or they would know that for Taparelli "the abstract" is only a fraction of the inquiry in every question of morality. As a practical philosophy, moral analysis

⁴ "Le due economie," translated as "Les deux economies," in R. Jacquin, *Essai sur les principes d'économie politique* (Paris, 1943), p. 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶ For this reason of methodology, Taparelli's views on authority, liberalism, constitutionalism, representative government, freedom of conscience, Italian unification, etc., all are subject to selective misreading.

requires constant reference to actual experience and historical facts, which not only form the basis for the ascertainment of abstract principles but also establish the actual concrete conditions of their articulation and the establishment of right and wrong. And when it is a matter of the rights that are produced by the natural law of society in combination with the particular facts of this or that association, there is one simple law: “l'intento particolare dell'associazione mai non deve distruggere l'intento sociale naturale.” (ST, 655) Whatever cause had arisen that led to the forced subjugation of persons, for reason of security or compensation for crimes for instance, such intent could never be allowed to end with those persons having lost their just liberty and dignity to which they are called as human beings. Taparelli goes right to the heart of how the natural law approach to the question of slavery has historically arrived at two different understandings of its moral legitimacy, depending on how one has defined the issue: either as the unlimited right to use a person for one's own self-interest, which is an abomination, or as the right in perpetuity to the labors of a person all the while respecting all of that is due to the person's humanity. He suggests that situations of the latter sort may have been the case among the Germans, the early Romans, and the first Christians. (ST, 656) But, and this is the important point from a concrete historical and developmental perspective which one might overlook: the natural law prohibits absolutely the total subjugation of one person to another, “niun uomo può essere VERAMENTE e TOTALMENTE padrone di un suo simile.” (ST, 1511, capitals in original).

“Perocchè esser padrone significa *ordinare al proprio bene*: or l'uomo è *per essenza ordinato al Bene infinito*, nel cui possesso *dee cercare il bene suo proprio*: dunque non può esser ordinato *nell'esser suo* al bene di verun padrone terreno.” (ST, 1511, italics in original)

Confusion arises from failing to distinguish the labor of an individual from the laboring person, and slavery built on such an identification is nothing less than a crime against nature:

“Dal che nacquero quelle *brutalità* che formano il vitupero del Paganesimo, imitate pur troppo, fino alla recente abolizione della schiavitù, da molti che ebbero nome ma non sensi di Cristiano. E Dio sa se non continua tuttora presso certi *inumani* in quei paesi over ancor non si dismette la schiavitù legale.” (ST, 1511, italics added to highlight)

It is indeed unfortunate that Taparelli's concern for sustaining important distinctions of principle sometimes leaves him creating confusion over the concrete conclusions that he has set out to prove. Taparelli's identification of the degrees of “honor” in labor, service to another (“servitù”), and the definition of slavery (“schiavitù”) as being bound “per tutta la vita e in tutte le opere” as part of his schema of the various kinds of “domestic societies” formed around

reciprocal provision for the *immediate* and *limited* needs of individuals, (ST, 1512) should in no way lead one to neglect what else he has argued on the *brutality* and *inhumanity* of slavery as it concretely exists. Slavery as it concretely exists is excluded by the logic of human dignity.

True slavery is only concretely possible where the ultimate end of persons has been reduced to utilitarian and Epicurean principles, where religious piety before nature's Author has been trivialized and banished from the public square:

“Togliete dalla società la religione, e vedrete l'uomo diventar mercanzia, e meno apprezzato forse di un buon somiere: l'attestano gli Iloti di Sparta, gli schiavi di Roma corrotta.” (ST, 222)

The radical secularist view, with its conception of human dignity based solely on personal autonomy and material satisfaction, has proven itself unable to respond to the crises of social disintegration and anomie which increasingly characterize the economically advanced societies of the West. Taparelli would argue that the predominance of the secularist view among the intellectual and political elites of the West is indeed responsible for fostering the conditions which have undermined families, religious and educational institutions, and the whole host of intermediary associations within society which people naturally form for the provision for human necessities. In the secularists' drive to monopolize the public discourse on the proper ends of societies composed of autonomous individuals, the transcendent end of persons has been the chief victim, sacrificed on the altar of a false tolerance and a weak humanitarianism. The “autonomous individual” is either destined to a life consumed with the calculations of pleasure and security, with satisfaction and peace lying always just outside reach, over the next horizon; or perhaps he will opt for the sort of “soft” Nietzscheanism which seems to have increasing appeal—shifting from “live dangerously” to “live indifferently.” Taparelli was one of the first of the neo-scholastics to clearly make the case that without an appreciation of our natural dependence—on others in society, on nature, and on nature's Author—*just liberty*, the true vocation and dignity of man, cannot be grasped.