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On Kingship

Aquinas

Study Guide on Thomas Aquinas' *On Kingship*

According to St. Thomas, what is the best form of government, and why?

Does St. Thomas consider government to be a natural good or a necessary evil? What premises underlie his understanding? Do they seem convincing to you? (See especially Book I, Chapter 1 of *On Kingship*.¹)

What distinguishes kingship from tyranny? (See *Kingship* 4–10 for the basis for kingship and the definition of “king,” and 8 for an account of “tyrant.”) Is this a categorical distinction, or can a ruler be somewhere in between?

“Yet it is natural for man, more than for any other animal, to be a social and political animal, to live in a group” (4). What does St. Thomas mean by “natural” here? Explain how this idea of nature pertains to the overall argument regarding kingship and government.

Explain why, according to Aquinas, groups require some means by which to be governed (5–6)?

What is the end of kingship? What goal must the king strive to achieve? (See 11–12.)

What seems to be St. Thomas's view on the scope of government?

- How does the distinction between private and common good relate to this question? Consider that the common good is the proper concern of the king, yet this is something “higher” than the good of the single man.
- How does the authority of the king relate to the authority of the priests and especially the pope (61–63)?
- How might Aquinas respond to someone who claimed that, since men are fallen, it is better to have a weaker form of government than a stronger?

Why does Thomas think that, despite the evil of tyranny, kingship remains the most desirable form of government? (Consider Book I, Chapter 5.) What kinds of reasons does he give? Are they convincing? Consider:

- “It is expedient therefore that a just government be that of one man only in order that it may be stronger; however, if the government should turn away from justice, it is more expedient that it be a government by many, so that it may be weaker and the many may mutually hinder one another” (15).

¹ Thomas Aquinas. *On Kingship to the King of Cyprus*. Translated by Gerard B. Phelan. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



- “. . . When, on the other hand, one man is in command, he more often keeps to governing for the sake of the common good” (22).
- “A polyarchy deviates into tyranny not less but perhaps more frequently than a monarchy . . .” (22).

In what way is the good of one man subordinate to the good of the city? What implications does this have for the relation between government and the individual person?

What is St. Thomas’s view of trade and its effects on men and the city (76–78)? Does trade necessarily lead to vice?

- “Again, if the citizens themselves devote their life to matters of trade, the way will be opened to many vices” (76).
- “Since the foremost tendency of tradesmen is to make money, greed is awakened in the hearts of the citizens through the pursuit of trade. . . . good faith will be destroyed . . . the cultivation of virtue will fail . . .” (76).
- “The pursuit of trade is also very unfavourable to military activity” (77).
- “[T]he perfect city will make a moderate use of merchants” (78).

How does the king bring about virtue in the kingdom? What hints does Aquinas give in these works as to the means at the king’s disposal?

Consider Book II, Chapter 8. What ill effects come from overindulgence in pleasure, according to St. Thomas? Consider how each effect influences the life of the man and the life of the city.

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Thomas Aquinas’ *On Kingship*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

