

Political Decision-Making Between Morality and Pragmatism: A Christian Perspective

Abstract

Political actors routinely face a tension between pragmatic effectiveness and moral or religious conviction. Drawing on classical and modern political theory, this article examines how pragmatism, understood as an orientation toward practical outcomes, interacts with Christian, and specifically Catholic, moral reasoning in the evaluation of political conduct. The analysis traces the philosophical genealogy of political pragmatism from Aristotle and Machiavelli through the American pragmatist tradition of Peirce and James, and situates it against Catholic social teaching and magisterial guidance on the responsibilities of Catholic legislators. Max Weber's classical distinction between an "ethic of conviction" (Gesinnungsethik) and an "ethic of responsibility" (Verantwortungsethik) is employed as the principal analytical framework for understanding how politicians reconcile moral commitment with the practical consequences of their decisions. Historical illustrations, including Winston Churchill's wartime decision regarding Coventry and debates over parliamentary party discipline, show how this tension is negotiated in practice. The article situates these theoretical resources within a religiously conditioned political culture, offering conceptual groundwork for comparative research on how politicians navigate pragmatic and value-based political action.

Keywords: political pragmatism; Christian ethics; Max Weber; ethic of responsibility; ethic of conviction; political theory

Note: This preprint is an adapted, translated excerpt from the theoretical chapter of the author's bachelor's thesis: Sebastian Wijas, "Wybory polityczne w karierze Jarosława Gowina i Marka Jurka" [Political Choices in the Career of Jarosław Gowin and Marek Jurek] (bachelor's thesis, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Faculty of Historical and Social Sciences, Institute of Political Science, 2018). The empirical case study of the two politicians formed a separate part of the original thesis and is not reproduced here; this article presents only the thesis's theoretical framework on pragmatism and Christian morality.

1. Pragmatism in Political Activity

Politics affects the whole of our lives. It shapes our reality in ways that often go unnoticed. Many social groups strive to coexist with one another, working out the best solutions for their common existence. In his book *In Defence of Politics*, Bernard Crick defines this sphere of human activity as follows:[1]

"Politics can be defined simply as the activity through which the interests of the various social groups living within a territory subject to a single authority are reconciled, by granting them a share in government in proportion to their significance for the survival and prosperity of the whole community."

On this definition, politics is an activity of many individuals and collectivities, focused on reconciling their positions across the various spheres of state life. The definition specifies that these groups hold a share in government proportional to their significance for the community, yet this share is not fixed; competition among differing interests is therefore a normal and constant feature of social life. Each actor seeks to maximize its own influence over reality in order to shape it to its advantage — an interplay of groups that Crick calls politics. Over the centuries, certain principles were developed to safeguard fairness among individuals; the activity is bounded and given its framework by law, binding

on all equally. Yet the desire to gain and retain power, or to force through some postulate or agenda, can raise moral dilemmas that often exceed the scope of positive law. Conducting an intrigue against a political rival, for instance — covert action that does not cross the letter of the law but curtails a rival's influence on the political stage — belongs to a different order of activity altogether.

In the late nineteenth century, a new philosophical current emerged in the United States. The fathers of pragmatism, as it came to be known, were Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910), and John Dewey (1859–1952). Extensive debate on the practical dimension of power took place in those years and was also reflected in Polish scholarship. *Pragmatism*, one of the principal works on this then-pioneering current of thought, was written by William James and was translated into Polish as early as 1911 by Władysław Kozłowski, edited by Henryk Goldberg. The text presents what the Anglo-German philosopher Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller, an active participant in the pragmatist debate, called Peirce's principle:[2]

“Confirmation of the validity — that is, the truth — of a proposition consists in verifying whether it satisfies our interest or conflicts with it. In the first case it is good; in the second, bad. If the consequences of a proposition do not correspond to our needs, we reject the proposition itself as mistaken and look for a new one.”

The passage reflects the then-prevailing conviction that the validity of an act or a claim is beneficial precisely insofar as it accords with our interest. The chief warrant for a given activity is its usefulness at a given moment, rather than validity as such. If a politician in a democratic state judges that cooperation with an authoritarian regime is economically advantageous, but in exchange refrains from raising the issue of that regime's undemocratic parliamentary elections, this stance can be called pragmatism: he has achieved his aim while attending to the welfare of the citizens of his own democratic state. The author of the quotation cited above also frames this in terms of good and evil: if the criterion of truth, understood in terms of usefulness to the subject, is not met, the decision is bad; if the reverse holds, it is good. Such an understanding of the world constitutes a pragmatic stance. Yet this opens a further question. One can be pragmatic — that is, base one's decisions on practicality — but the question remains open: pragmatic for whom, or in whose interest? The politician's own? The state's? Society's? Some idea's?

Aristotle's ancient treatise *Politics*, written by a student of Plato, sets out his account of how citizens ought to be oriented toward the state and how individuals are bound to one another. His reflections laid the groundwork for later thinking about political order. Subsequent scholars, including Christian ones, built on his philosophical concepts; Saint Thomas Aquinas is a well-known example of a thinker who reread Aristotle's writings from a Christian perspective and adapted some of his intuitions to Christian values.[3] Aristotle writes, for example:[4]

“So too with citizens: although differences exist among them, the task of all of them is the good of the community. (...) At the same time, one must not suppose that any citizen belongs to himself; on the contrary, all belong to the state, for each of them is a part of the state. Care for each part must therefore, by its very nature, keep in view care for the whole.”

The philosopher recognizes that differences exist among individuals within the state. Despite this, Aristotle takes the common good of the community to be the aim of citizens; each has a necessary social role to fulfil. The passage also uses the word “task,” expressing a certain demand placed on citizens, and highlights the bonds among people that unite them in care for the state: since each citizen is part of a larger whole, this determines their cooperation for the common good, producing relations that find expression in the collectivity of individuals. This perspective, developed by ancient philosophers, laid the foundation for later theoretical assumptions about the state: political effort

thereby acquired a defined aim, and the politically engaged actor was to be a representative of his people, motivated above all by the common good — which is fully compatible with a political program that also pursues pragmatic policy for one's country.

According to Mieczysław Krapiec, it was already Niccolò Machiavelli's thought that opened the space for separating politics from morality.[5] This Italian thinker's *The Prince* marked the beginning of a wholly different approach to politics, in which gaining and holding power was, for Machiavelli, a refined art. “Men will always be bad to you, unless necessity compels them to be good,”[6] a statement that clearly shows good and evil being used instrumentally. This was a revolutionary shift. In morally oriented political activity, what mattered was that actions be good in themselves, within the agent; but in the activity Machiavelli portrays, what counts above all is the effect of one's work — the result of the craft, not the goodness of the craftsman. A doctor wants good results in his practice; a sculptor wants to produce a work of art. The politician Machiavelli describes counts on a positive outcome of given acts without regard for another person's good, even at that person's expense. This is one possible form of pragmatic conduct, one in which the categories of good and evil blur: any means is justified if it leads to the end.

Sophocles, in *Antigone*, dramatizes this situation in the dialogue between Creon and Haemon, from which it emerges that the ruler regards the state as his own possession, with citizens as mere components, rather than treating politics as the realization of the common good:[7]

“Creon: And was not that other one wrong to err so?
Haemon: The voice of the people of Thebes denies it.
Creon: Shall the city, then, tell me how I must rule?
Haemon: You speak now like a headstrong young man.
Creon: Do I govern this land for another, or for myself?
Haemon: A city that belongs to one man alone is no city at all.
Creon: Does not the city belong to its ruler?
Haemon: You would rule well, then — over a desert.”

Thinking in this way breeds egoism among decision-makers. Yet a politician must be aware that, across a whole society, a readiness to act against the common good is anything but rare, and that in relations among states, force, cunning, and cynicism often carry more weight than the justice of a cause. A politician might try to bring into political life the moral values instilled by his parents, making trust and empathy the chief motivations of his activity on the state's behalf; but he would then lose power very quickly, and the state would suffer considerable harm from other states, or from internal rivals for power, exploiting the situation. A telling illustration of the consequences of such conduct can be found in Józef Feldman's book *Bismarck a Polska* [Bismarck and Poland], which records statements by various Prussian diplomats regarding the treatment of the Poles then living in Prussian-held territories:[8]

““Strike at the Poles,” Bismarck wrote to his sister on 26 March 1861, “until they lose all desire to live; I personally sympathize with their plight, but if we wish to survive, we have no choice but to exterminate them. Nor is the wolf to blame for being made by God as he is; that is precisely why he is killed whenever possible.””

The position in which Otto von Bismarck, Chancellor of the German Empire and known as the Iron Chancellor, found himself illustrates what political pragmatism is. The interest of his citizens was unambiguous: the Poles could not gain independence, since this would weaken the whole of a freshly unified empire.

To summarize this section, we see the complexity of the problems underlying any political decision. Pragmatism exercised on behalf of the people, or simply for the sake of holding power, motivates activity that can shade into cynicism. Jacek Salij's essay "Autonomia polityki i prawo moralne" [The Autonomy of Politics and Moral Law] contains an important observation about the destructive potential of this style of governance: "although in politics one must somehow reckon with morality, the postulate that politics be subordinated to moral principles is a harmful idealism." [9] The politician's actual orientation — the common good, or his own — remains ultimately a matter known only to himself.

2. Christian Morality and Politics

A certain rivalry is built into the very nature of politics. Every move on the political stage is calculated toward some concrete gain. The goods being contested matter to groups or to individuals, who ground their efforts in chosen means. Which political decision is the right one? What may one permit oneself in pursuit of a given aim? Every person holds principles adopted from others, from specific verbal and nonverbal experiences accumulated over a lifetime of socialization. Children learning from their parents' example, then entering the stage of encountering peers, and later being shaped by school, illustrate that everything can open new perspectives — and, moreover, that this process does not end at the age of majority but continues throughout life. It shapes us and builds the schema by which we learn to make decisions. One need not be a politician to face difficult choices; but something always guides our discernment of what is right. This is not mere calculation of self-interested benefit, but also rightness. We recognize, consciously or not, that morality exists: principles that help us choose between good and evil.

Morality, from the Latin *moralitas*, translates as custom or mores. The word points to the past, since a custom was established at some point and is practiced because it is held to be good. In the *Great Encyclopedia of the Teaching of John Paul II*, Jan Kowalski defines the entry "Morality" as follows: [10]

"Morality — the general obligation imposed on man in his relations with others, with himself, and with nature; a requirement which, unlike law, presents itself as a challenge, and which, unlike custom or social convention, is not binding merely on account of social sanction, but because it addresses man as a rational and free being."

The author calls morality a duty rather than merely an option available to man. Recourse to it is necessary in the relationship between authority and citizen, between authority and opposition, and equally in the relationship between a politician and his political rival. It is worth noting that Kowalski also cites nature as a point of reference for moral obligation; legal regulation concerns not only human affairs but also the protection of nature broadly understood — a theme Pope Francis addressed in his second encyclical, *Laudato si'*, published in 2015. [11] The passage on morality quoted above speaks of "a requirement (...) which presents itself as a challenge," implying that morality is, for human beings, anything but a straightforward duty to discharge. The word "dilemma" is often used to capture this state — a difficulty in choosing or resolving a problem because of two equally weighty considerations. Facing such a situation is a frequent condition for a politician, which makes it worth clarifying what factors bear on decision-making.

Morality, on the definition set out above, is not codified by written norms in the way that a legal order is, nor does it constitute a tradition-derived custom binding by virtue of social sanction; it can only be adopted and practiced in freedom. A politician is frequently in a position where multiple interest-group pressures bear on his decision, as each group seeks to protect its own influence. He must find

his way to a good decision on the basis of the morality he holds, even though every social group has a point from its own perspective; but it is the politician who holds power and who decides the most important matters for a given period, a given term of office. Under the same entry, Kowalski continues:[12]

“A person who conforms to these requirements acts well; one who transgresses them does evil. He is subject to biological, psychological, and socio-cultural conditioning, but these do not determine him.”

The demands morality places on us determine whether our conduct is right: complying with them, we do well; failing to, we do ill — a tension worked through within the individual. Upbringing of a particular kind, or childhood experience, may bear on the choices of adult life. The author further stresses that although everyone is subject to conditioning arising from culture, religion, or local community, these do not determine one's final decisions. A politician cannot be conditioned solely by his past; before deciding, he ought rationally to weigh the positions of lobbying groups, but these cannot be the sole basis for his decision.

It is worth examining the theme of Christian morality more closely here. Approaches to this subject vary by denomination; to narrow the scope, this article focuses on the Catholic perspective. In 2017 the Polish Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny) reported that more than thirty-two million people in Poland are baptized members of the Catholic Church[13] — making it by a wide margin the country's largest religious community. This institutional and demographic weight matters for a comparative reader unfamiliar with the Polish case: it translates directly into sustained cultural and electoral pressure on politicians of the center and right, who cannot easily set questions of Catholic moral teaching aside when calculating a pragmatic course of action, which is precisely what makes the Polish setting a useful laboratory for the theoretical tension examined here.

The Catholic Church has developed the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), which concisely summarizes dogmatic teaching and expounds doctrines of faith and tradition. It addresses morality in paragraph 1749; the following passage sets out the conditions under which, in the Church's teaching, conduct is moral:[14]

“Freedom makes man a moral subject. When he acts deliberately, man is, so to speak, the father of his acts. Human acts, that is, acts that are freely chosen in consequence of a judgment of conscience, can be morally evaluated. They are either good or evil.”

According to the Catechism, only a free person can be a moral subject — a category that reveals a certain paradox given the pressure that interest groups exert on decision-makers. A moral act is such only when the person is free from external pressure; this does not mean pressure cannot arise. As discussed in the previous section, various constituencies rightly press for the improvement of their own circumstances, and every vote in a democratic election is itself a form of political contest. Freedom of decision, then, means an inner posture of independence in judging any given matter. The Catechism's phrase “father of his acts” captures precisely this: a politician who acts deliberately, aware of his position within the social hierarchy, his own sensitivities and views, and the lobbying of individuals or groups, is nonetheless the father of his political decisions. Such a stance qualifies as moral.

The International Theological Commission, in its document *Christian Morality and Its Norms*, established a particular way of thinking about morality for believers: “The Christian who lives by faith has the right to ground moral conduct in that faith.”[15] According to the Commission, a person of religious conviction should not merely act morally but should ground that conduct in faith. Yet, given the complexity of social development, it has been observed that political thought frequently

presents ambiguous cases; the complexity of the issues and interests involved can raise doubts about what can genuinely be considered moral. This is why the Catholic Church, observing the transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, undertook to formulate a coherent body of Catholic social teaching. Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* was the first to use the phrase *Catholic social teaching*,[16] although Pope Leo XIII is generally credited as the originator of the concept: his earlier 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* marked the beginning of the Church's institutional engagement against the socialist and communist movements popular at the time, as well as against extreme capitalism.[17] In 2005 the Pontifical Council *Iustitia et Pax* published the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, collecting in book form the key practical and theoretical issues developed by Catholic specialists in the field. The following passage from the *Compendium* extends our discussion of morality in the context of faith:[18]

“The political community and the Church, each in its own field, are autonomous and independent from each other. “Yet both, under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the same human beings.” It may even be said that the distinction between religion and politics, together with the principle of religious freedom, constitutes a specific achievement of Christianity, one of great historical and cultural significance.”

Catholic social teaching thus holds that the political community and the ecclesial community are separate entities. They are not merged, even though members may belong to both; each should attend to its own autonomy, which guarantees its freedom of action, and independence protects both from subordination to the other. A Catholic is a member of the Church, which is one form of association shared with fellow believers, and is also a member of the political community, a distinct but equally necessary body that shapes citizens' political reality. Faith forms a person's approach to moral problems and is taught and developed within the Church; internalizing Christian morality centers on certain ideals meant to guide believers' life decisions, whereas the political community bears direct responsibility for how people live together on a given territory — a responsibility the Church does not share. This separation between religion and politics is precisely what makes their cooperation possible. Catholic social teaching underscores the importance of this separation, while also naming civic engagement as an activity that links the two communities:[19]

“The full realization of the human person (...) matures in history and is achieved through the person's relations with others, relations that reach their fulfilment through commitment to improving the world, in justice and peace.”

Over the centuries, various political systems have taken shape, all grounded in cooperation among individuals within a group; this coexistence functioned on differing terms depending on the wealth of historical experience involved. The quotation above stresses that a human person achieves full self-realization through relations with others, in a shared effort to improve the world; it does not say that only cooperation among Catholics bears fruit, but cooperation among human beings as such. Faith is not a precondition of collective initiative, though the passage does specify criteria: it must be pursued “in justice and peace.” These stated values show that Catholic social teaching proposes a universal approach to cooperation. The present article, however, concentrates on politicians who identify themselves as Catholic.

Every citizen, and a Catholic politician in particular, tries to enact in his profession the principles of faith rooted in Christian morality; he judges in conscience what serves and what does not serve the common good. Vatican documents state this very plainly:[20]

“The Magisterium of the Church teaches that when, in matters and areas touching on fundamental ethical requirements, legislative or political decisions are proposed or adopted that are contrary to Christian principles and values, (...) no one is permitted to

contribute, by casting a vote, to the implementation of such a political program or of a specific law.”

A politician facing a bill incompatible with the Church's values is placed in an unambiguous situation. This is set out in the doctrinal note on certain questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith following approval by Pope John Paul II.[21] It follows plainly that a legislator may not vote for a law or program contrary to accepted Catholic morality. What a Catholic politician actually judges to be immoral, however, remains open to debate. The Church has recognized that a case may arise in which voting for a flawed bill can minimize its harmful consequences, even though it remains tainted by moral evil; the doctrinal note also addresses this situation:[22]

“The Magisterium likewise teaches that in the case where it would be impossible to prevent or to overturn such political programs or laws, a legislator whose absolute personal opposition to them is well known and manifest to all would rightly support proposals aimed at reducing the harm caused by these programs and laws and at lessening their negative effects on public culture and morality.”

In such precedent-setting circumstances, a politician may vote for a proposal that does not accord with Christian morality; the justification is the reduction or limitation of the harm caused by a bad program. Whether a given law should be interpreted as morally at odds with a Catholic politician's convictions, while nonetheless minimizing harm, remains an open interpretive question. This possibility highlights the weight of responsibility borne by the person casting the vote, who must answer in conscience whether a given course of action is right.

3. Shaping Political Decisions

The situations in which a politician finds himself are multifaceted and rarely unambiguous. Political decisions are dictated by various factors, yet a sovereign or non-sovereign choice is ultimately made — in line with interest, morality, or faith. Every legislator settles on some particular strategy for the matter under consideration, depending on the approach he has adopted toward the issue. This section considers some of the political strategies available to a politician, and his stance toward external pressures, allowing us to reflect on the practical place of ethics in politics and to ask whether morality binds equally in every person's life, regardless of engagement in public service.

The philosopher and sociologist Max Weber addressed this question directly. His lecture *Politics as a Vocation*, delivered in late January 1919 in Munich, the capital of Bavaria, was transcribed and published that same October. In it, he introduced new categories for describing the stance of the politically engaged person:[23]

“We must be clear that all ethically oriented conduct may be guided by one of two fundamentally different, opposed, and irreconcilable maxims: it can be oriented to an “ethic of conviction” [Gesinnungsethik] or to an “ethic of responsibility” [Verantwortungsethik].”

Weber stresses that any action undertaken according to ethical principles can rest on one of two distinct maxims (this does not apply to conduct that disregards ethics altogether). These maxims are, in effect, findings that amount to two possible approaches to politics; in the passage quoted, Weber focuses on the actor's intentionality in adopting an ethical perspective, and it is only on this assumption that the framework he goes on to describe applies. The two maxims he names are the “ethic of conviction,” corresponding to a commitment to accepted moral values, and the “ethic of responsibility,” which gives priority, as the name suggests, to conduct assessed by the criterion of its

consequences. It might seem puzzling that two such variants could count as distinct ethics at all: for Weber, “maxim” is not one interpretation among several of the most fundamental moral truths and principles, but rather an attempted resolution of a particular dilemma between accepted morality and a specific field of political engagement. Each maxim is distinct, and only one can be realized in a given course of conduct; they remain separate, indeed opposed to one another. Weber goes on to clarify the difference between them:[24]

“This does not mean that an ethic of conviction is identical with irresponsibility, or an ethic of responsibility with a lack of conviction. There can of course be no question of that. But there is an abysmal contrast between conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of conviction — in religious terms, “the Christian does rightly and leaves the outcome to God” — and conduct that follows an ethic of responsibility, in which one must answer for the (foreseeable) consequences of one's actions.”

Weber insists that the two ethics, opposed as they are, are not simply inversions of one another: an ethic of conviction does not amount to irresponsibility, nor does an ethic of responsibility amount to an absence of conviction; yet, despite this, they remain something entirely different from each other. To illustrate this more fully, Weber offers an example. If we take action according to an ethic of conviction — which might be expressed through culture, personal vision, or religion — a Christian, on this view, strives to increase the good in the world while leaving the ultimate outcome to God. The implication is that if the consequences of an act deemed “good” on grounds of conviction alone turn out to be clearly bad, responsibility for those consequences lies with some third party of ill intent, or with God's will — not with the person who chose the good according to his convictions. Matters stand differently under an ethic of responsibility, where a politician's decision becomes the measure of the responsibility resting on him personally: his conduct is oriented toward realizing the good while taking its consequences into account. Here there is an awareness that some course of action, right according to conviction, may not be pursued if it would produce still worse consequences — and the assessment of such conduct falls to the politician himself. This raises the problem of how to achieve an aim despite its consequences in other domains. Weber formulates his thesis on the ethic of conviction and its consequences as follows:[25]

“It seems, then, that an ethic of conviction must simply founder on the problem of the end justifying the means. Logically, it really has only one option: to reject any action that employs morally dangerous means. (...) Where political action is concerned, it is not true that only good can follow from good and only evil from evil; often, quite the reverse holds.”

“The end justifies the means”[26] is, according to a standard Polish phraseological dictionary, the achievement of some lofty end by dishonest means — a definition that captures a pattern of conduct judged wrong in light of its ultimate result. According to the passage from Weber quoted above, matters are not quite so simple: an ethic of conviction is not, in fact, suited to such an approach at all, since anything that is wrong must be rejected by an adherent of that ethic; immoral acts, at odds with accepted morality, cannot be undertaken on those terms, and rejection is the only available option. For Weber, political conduct grounded solely in the assumption that only good consequences can follow from good, and only bad from bad, is at odds with the complicated reality of public life; he challenges this claim by noting that the reverse often holds. As an illustration, consider an episode from twentieth-century political practice. In 1974, Captain Frederick W. Winterbotham's book *The Ultra Secret* revealed that Winston Churchill, the British prime minister during the Second World War, knew in advance of the planned Luftwaffe raid on Coventry but did not order the city's defense, for fear of revealing that British and American cryptographers had broken the German ciphers.[27] This

was conduct consistent with an ethic of responsibility. Breaking the cipher was a turning point in the war; disclosing this fact by defending the city on 14 November 1940 would very probably have saved many lives, but revealing the intelligence prematurely risked prompting the Germans to change their cipher. The British, weighing the good of their alliance, chose to continue learning the key plans and strategies of the Third Reich, which gave them an enormous advantage. The bombing of Coventry was the negative consequence of that decision, but the higher aim was securing an advantage in the war as a whole. One may reasonably ask whether Churchill's choice determined the course of the conflict; on his own calculation of the balance of good, exposure could have had still worse consequences for the country as a whole.

It is worth adding a further example of a difficult decision that does not arise in wartime, and so has a different character. As discussed elsewhere, party discipline is one component of the expectations placed on a politician. A. Dylus describes this problem in one of her monographs:[28]

“A possible disagreement between a politician and his own party over how to vote on a specific matter in parliament would amount to a conflict between the value or values the politician experiences a given issue as generating, and the interest expected by the party, achievable only at the price of sacrificing those values. (...) Nevertheless, this dichotomous picture — on one side a disinterested politician committed to values, on the other a party that is at best axiologically indifferent but self-interested — is, of course, a considerable simplification.”

The quotation stresses the significance of the conflict between a party and a legislator over voting strategy on a given bill. Such a situation might suggest that the politician is the one attentive to values, set against a party driven by interest to the exclusion of principled aims; Dylus calls this impression a “dichotomous picture,” one that in its basic premises is overly simplistic. Matters of conscience, such as legislation on civil partnerships, are typically exempted from party discipline; other matters are more often subject to it. Even so, this mechanism is important for the functioning of parliamentary democracy: in her book, Dylus discusses a number of benefits associated with this instrument of pressure. Discipline provides a certain guarantee of executive stability, makes it harder for legislators to hide behind personal conscience when making decisions that are patently dishonest and driven by private interest, helps a member of parliament remain faithful to the electoral platform he promised, and guards against a lack of civic courage.[29] Even in the case of a bill that is neutral on questions of conscience, a legislator still marks out, in effect, what is and is not right. Even where he judges a proposal to be mistaken, a politician may vote for the bill for the sake of the government's and the state's stability. This is a choice with real consequences, though undertaken in the name of a larger aim.

The doctrinal note of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on certain questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life addresses a further, important dimension of public conduct:[30]

“All political activity aims, in the end, at the concrete realization of the true good of the human person and of society, within a strictly defined historical, geographical, economic, technical, and cultural context. The concrete character of this realization, and the diversity of the circumstances involved, mean that there is usually a range of possible visions and solutions, all of which must nonetheless be morally admissible.”

For the authors, every political act concretizes the good in a person's temporal life within a community, embedded in specific circumstances reflected in the state of a given culture, economy, or history. The array of factors and the position of a given politician, or of politicians generally, mean that several courses of action are typically available in a given matter; the document stresses that any

such course must be morally acceptable. Each person may have a different sensibility, different conditioning, and a different approach to a given proposal, which grounds a right to maintain that distinctness, assessed in one's own conscience.

A political choice thus presents a challenge to a politician's conscience. How that choice is assessed, and by what standard, forms the foundation both for the future course of his career and for the good of the state itself. Certain standards can be brought to bear in shaping political decisions, since this is an activity that sets its own goals and pursues their realization at the cost of some other, lesser good, in the politician's own estimation. One possible path is to propose courses of action consistent with one's own ideals — though this, too, may turn out to be the choice with the worse consequences.

Footnotes

- [1] Bernard Crick. *W obronie polityki* [In Defence of Politics]. Warsaw, 2004.
- [2] William James. *Pragmatyzm* [Pragmatism]. Krakow, 2016.
- [3] Adam Czarnecki. *Recepcja Arystotelesa w filozofii św. Tomasza z Akwinu* [The Reception of Aristotle in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas]. Gdansk, 1999.
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