Dogmatomachy: Ideological Warfare

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Abstract: Dogmatomachy (ideological warfare) has infected contemporary liberal-democratic politics, and we need to understand it. In this essay I analyze domatomachy in terms of its logical postulates: abstraction, absolutization and the belief that total victory is achievable in domestic political disputes. I then show the folly of approaching politics in this manner by contrasting the constraints that necessarily characterize human politics with the relatively unconstrained politics exhibited by the mythopoetic figure of Olympian Zeus. In the end I conjecture that dogmatomachy, while wrongheaded as an approach to everyday politics, is likely to be with us for a long time, though I hold out some hope that by understanding its defects we may begin to seek its cure.

Keywords: ideology, dogmatomachy, Voegelin, Oakeshott, Arendt, rights, absolutes, abstraction, just war theory, identity politics, single-issue voting, Federalist 10.

Grau, theurer Freund, ist alle Theorie
Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.[1]

Anyone who pays attention to the practice of Western democratic politics today will know something of the phenomenon I wish to investigate. What the best theorists and practitioners of politics from ages past called "political deliberation" has now fallen on hard times. Instead of striving to formulate and exchange insights into who we are as a people and what we want to do, political actors today seem bent on using words as weapons. Their goal is neither collaborative wisdom nor comprehensive political action but total victory over all rivals so that the political *cosmos* might be unilaterally controlled. Once control is achieved, a new arrangement (*taxis*) is wrought, more or less according to the victors' own preferences. But of course ultimate victory is rarely possible in politics. Partiality may masquerade as completeness for a time, but it is an unstable ground for political order, if only because our political rivals can never be completely exterminated. Such is the shortsightedness of ideological politics and ideological debate.

Why has this style of politics increased so much in scale and intensity in recent years? No doubt the answer is far from simple, and we may never reach a fully satisfactory explanation. But I do think the phenomenon admits of analysis. In what follows I try to shed light on contemporary ideological warfare by means of two independent but mutually reinforcing methods. On the one hand, I look behind the phenomenon in order to identify its logical postulates. I ask, in other words, what does this approach to politics presuppose on the part of those who practice it?[2] On the other hand, I proceed by a method of metaphorical reasoning, using a carefully selected image—in this case the mythopoetic image of the Titanomachy—as a potentially illuminating *comparatum*. As I argue below, our contemporary clash of ideologies (dogmatomachy) is quite similar to the legendary Titanomachy in its goal of wresting control of the political cosmos from all rivals.[3] However, it differs from the Titanomachy in crucial respects which, once grasped, do not bode well for societies that allow this form of anti-politics to replace genuine political deliberation.

FIELDS OF BATTLE

Before embarking on the analysis, I offer just a few examples of the phenomenon in question so that readers might grasp what I have in mind. In all three examples, I proceed somewhat historically (albeit crudely) so that the phenomenon can be observed as it emerges on the scene. I have intentionally selected cases from three separate political spheres: those of "rights," "the ethics of war," and "voting behavior." These have almost nothing in common, save the accidental trait of becoming a battleground for our ever-spreading dogmatomachy. Once I render the phenomenon clear, readers will no doubt recognize that tragically few areas of political life are exempt from becoming venues for this kind of battle.

1. Rights

The beginnings of the rights tradition are largely obscure. We can, of course, point to early uses of the word "right" in legal codes, political treatises and charters, but this does not explain when or why the "rights tradition" was born. Why did the language of rights catch on? Why was the term pressed into service in contexts far removed from those in which it first appeared? Legal and political theorists have long claimed that the word "right" in its modern sense—that is, a power held by an individual or group to do, or refrain from doing, some act—was unknown to the ancients (e.g., Constant, 1988; Arnaud, 1973; MacIntyre, 1984, p. 67; Guess, 2008, pp. 60-70). But this is not quite accurate. Both the Greeks and Romans used the word right (*dikaios, jus*) to describe a subjective power, though they did so mostly in legal contexts.[4] The term was not part of everyday discourse. In the High Middle Ages, by contrast, "right" appears in prominent political charters, such as the Magna Carta (1215) for instance, where it is used eight times in a sense that seems perfectly modern: e.g., "the English Church shall be free and *shall have her rights entire*" (§1, *jura sua integra*). True, the number of rights in ancient and medieval writings was quite limited, but rights are not strictly speaking "modern." Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of ancient and medieval rights was their intimate connection to "custom." In Greek the word "right" itself (*dikē*), originally meant "custom," or "manner," as in *hē gar dikē esti gerontōn* (the manner of old men).

As students of the history of political thought know well, rights soon became the centerpiece of early modern political theory and practice. Writing in the middle of the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes simultaneously severed rights from custom and dramatically expanded their scope when he claimed that by nature "every man has a right to everything; even to one another's body" (Hobbes, 1996 [1651], chapter 14, p. 91). Of course Hobbes's claim applied only to man in his "natural state," not to man in civil society. But nevertheless, the notion that individuals naturally have abundant rights, that these are operative unless and until they are personally renounced, and indeed that some rights (such as the right to life) are positively "inalienable"—this is distinctly modern. In the realm of practice (as opposed to theory) rights were expanded and codified through the English "Petition of Rights" (1628), the "Habeas Corpus Act" (1679) and the "Bill of Rights" (1689). By 1776, the American "Declaration of Independence" could assert "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," as *some* of man's inalienable rights, along with the right to alter or abolish any form of government not conducive thereunto. And in 1789 the French "Declaration of the Rights of Man" expanded the catalog even further to include liberty, property, security, resistance to oppression, the right to have equal rights, the right to participate in lawmaking, either personally or through a representative, the right to free communication of ideas and opinions, the right to decide (personally or through a representative) what taxes should be collected, and the right to hold public servants accountable.

Throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, novel rights seemed to emerge out of the woodwork. But as the most astute commentators then and now have noticed, something also seemed amiss. Edmund Burke's trenchant critique of the development of modern rights is as salient now as when he wrote. Rights that had once been grounded in longstanding custom—the "rights of Englishmen," secured through political conflict and compromise—were now severed from custom. They had become "abstract," "metaphysical," and in this sense *weakened*. Moreover, as other commentators have noticed, the gradual expansion of rights to include ever-greater lists of goods ran into the problem of incoherence. In "The Declaration of the Rights of Man," for example, the inviolable and sacred right not to be deprived of one's private property (Art. 17), stands in obvious tension with the imprescriptible right of every human being to possess property (Art. 2). Just how will the formerly underprivileged come to possess property, if not from those who already own it? In his magisterial *History of European Liberalism*, Guido de Ruggiero has shown how this and other incoherencies emerged. The Declaration was "composed by a highly eclectic process of compilation, and by compromises voted by closure between the formulae of

the various leaders" (De Ruggiero, 1927, p. 70). In other words, it was a patchwork that had been hastily sewn together. And this is not unconnected to Burke's criticism about abstraction. Only in the abstract can incompatible rights be placed side-by-side without friction. In practice they must, somehow, be reconciled.

The process by which political actors today attempt to reconcile incompatible, abstract rights will be my first example of dogmatomachy. But first let me mark two further developments that make our current predicament especially fraught. One is that our rights have continued to swell since the nineteenth century to the point where a single volume can now scarcely contain them all. Oxford's always-expanding *Basic Documents on Human Rights* now runs more than twelve hundred pages (Brownlie and Goodwin-Gill, 2006). Even our "basic" rights today are legion. The second development is a trend toward the language of "absolutes." Such language itself is quite old. Blackstone, for instance, discussed "absolute rights" much in the manner of Hobbes and Locke as the *residuum* of rights from the state of nature that still obtain in civil society insofar as they do not threaten or harm the equal rights of our fellow citizens (Blackstone, 1893, Vol. 1, Bk. 1, ch. 1). But in Blackstone, unlike today, the word "absolute" admitted of significant qualification:

> The absolute rights of every Englishman [are] subject at times to fluctuate and change: their establishment (excellent as it is) being still human. At some times we have seen them depressed by overbearing and tyrannical princes; at others so luxuriant as even to tend to anarchy, a worse state than tyranny itself, as any government is better than none at all. But the vigour of our free constitution has always delivered the nation from these embarrassments: and, as soon as the convulsions consequent on the struggle have been over, the balance of our rights and liberties has settled to its proper level; and their fundamental articles have been from time to time asserted in parliament, as often as they were thought to be in danger (Blackstone, 1893, p. 127).

Blackstone recognized that absolutes in human affairs are never really absolute. Not only did they fluctuate, they could also be pressed too hard. But all such qualifications seem quaint compared to the character of "rights talk" today. For us, "absolute" means something more like "utterly without qualification or exception." Our language of rights is thus "the language of no compromise. . . . The winner takes all and the loser has to get out of town. The conversation is over" (Glendon, 1991, p. 9).

This notion—that the conversation is indeed over—suggests something important about the way rights conflicts must be settled today. They cannot be settled through collective deliberation, because conflicting absolutes are not dissoluble. They cannot be subject to reasonable compromise. And in any event, there are simply too many conflicting rights in our contemporary lexicon to make possible any kind of lasting settlement. Thus we launch our "grievous shafts upon one another . . . with a great battle cry" and fall headlong into war (Hesiod, 1967, lines 678-686, p. 129).

Of course, "war" need not mean recourse to arms—though this can and has been a way of attempting to settle our rights clashes. War more often takes the form of a battle of political wills played out on TV news shows, radio broadcasts, and ultimately in the courts. But it is still war. Once rights have been "abstracted" and "absolutized" to the point of deification, there is nothing left to do but to allow these deified concepts to hammer away at each other until total victory of one over others is achieved, which rarely happens. And what an epic, all-encompassing war this must be. The deified "right to choose abortion" must war against the absolute "right to life of the fetus;" the right to free speech against the right not to be offended; the right to bear arms against the right to safe streets; the right to influence elections against the right to equality of contributions; the right to privacy against the right to live in a secure society; the right to a clean environment against the right to a job that would be eliminated by environmental concerns; the right to smoke against the right not to be subject to second-hand smoke; the right to medical treatment against the right of hospitals to refuse treatment; the right of gay couples to adopt against the right of a child to be adopted by a heterosexual family; the right to know when sex offenders live within one's neighborhood (Megan's Law) against the right of privacy after serving a sentence. And so on. The list could be extended for pages,[5] and what it would reveal is that an enormous amount of our "politics" today is composed of the dogmatic assertion of one deified rights claim against another—in other words, dogmatomachy.

2. *Ethics of War*

Something similar has occurred in public discourse about war. The longstanding ethical framework in which Western democratic nations have historically deliberated about war is the "just war tradition." Of course, other ethical and non-ethical frameworks exist—pacifism, *raison d'état*, holy

war—but by and large, most deliberation, especially when conducted in public, relies on the terms and categories of the just war tradition: just cause, legitimate authority, right intention, likelihood of success, last resort, non-combatant immunity, proportionality, and so on. Even when political decision-makers reject this framework, they seem compelled to *pretend* to be working within it—so dominant is its moral status. And this is good. The very fact that western democratic nations recognize a common framework—a moral language—in which to consider what is legitimate and illegitimate in war helps foster stability and supply moral orientation.

Of course, the just war tradition does not speak with a single voice. Different theologians, philosophers, natural lawyers and international jurists have contributed various arguments, as well as various kinds of argumentation, to the common store. In fact, from St. Augustine in the 5th century to Brian Orend in the 21st, the style as well as the substance of the tradition has become so varied that it would be false to say the tradition really "tells us" what to do. Because of its rich pluralism, it offers no univocal instructions, teachings or doctrines, but only a "language" or "grammar" within which to deliberate *for ourselves* about the ethics of armed force. It is an aid, not an oracle.

But a change has recently taken place in the way the just war tradition is invoked. Increasingly, political theorists and practitioners appeal to it as if to a body of abstract doctrines. Various "criteria" for just war are discussed in the manner of items on a moral checklist. And political actors now expect the tradition to tell them unambiguously what to do. The problem, of course is much like the problem observed with rights above. As the lists of essential criteria grow longer, and a gradual process of absolutization sets in, the tradition, whose original power to illuminate depended on our sensitivity to the texts and contexts from which it emerged, suddenly appears as vexingly *incoherent*. Of course, its incoherence would not be problematic, save for the fact that we expect it to deliver timeless, moral absolutes.

An example will help clarify the problem. In the just war tradition the category of "last resort" is as old as the tradition itself: If policies and actions short of war have a *reasonable likelihood of success*, then war is not just. The phrase "reasonable likelihood" is a key qualification which, in effect, reconciles the idea of last resort with the overall aims and purposes of the just war framework. Unfortunately, the way this "criterion" is now expressed in our overly-parsimonious checklists is quite different: "War must be a last resort." Understandably, but nevertheless erroneously, this criterion has been taken to mean that as long as something, *anything*, can be said or done in order to delay an impending war, it *must* be done, or else the war is unjust. The notion of last resort has thus been abstracted and absolutized.[6] But now there is no choice but for those who hold this view to oppose doggedly all those who maintain—also in keeping with the just war tradition—that leaders have a responsibility to protect the innocent and punish the wicked. This too can be dogmatically defended in absolute terms: Leaders have a moral obligation, indeed an absolute *duty* to protect and punish. Hence we arrive at incompatible absolutes vying for preeminence, or dogmatomachy.

3. Voting

A final example of the phenomenon appears today in voting behavior. Historically speaking, voter preferences in liberal democratic regimes have tended to coalesce around different, competing visions of the common good. This is largely due to the role political parties play in electoral politics, gathering together diverse groups and interests and melding them into a coherent platform. Party platforms tend to be broad and inclusive, rather than narrow and exclusive, for the simple reason that to achieve electoral success, parties need as much support as possible. The effect on voters has been positive. Voters who might otherwise incline to a radically individualized set of preferences are compelled to broaden their horizons—to aggregate with other voters—in order to find political support.

But voters and parties alike today seem less focused on a vision of the common good and more willing to agitate unapologetically for partial and idiosyncratic goods. I am referring to the rise of "identity politics" and "single-issue politics" which began in the latter part of the twentieth century and continues today. So-called identity politics focus on the narrowly defined self-interest of particular groups who share some trait such as race, class, gender, religious outlook, sexual orientation, ethnic or national background, medical condition, profession or hobby. By means of a process that can be quite ruthless, individuals who share this trait are assimilated, willingly or unwillingly, into the group. (The process is called "conversion.") If someone resists, he may be publically "outed"—exposed as possessing the very trait or traits in terms of which he refused to define himself. Apostates are sometimes subject to fierce reprisals. Thus the very identity of a unique and complex human being is reduced to a category (an abstraction) for purposes of political action.[7]

Single-Issue politics are similar. They involve campaigning for, or voting with an eye to, one essential policy area or outcome. Areas such as the environment, education or healthcare are treated as all-important. Outcomes such as "pro-life" or "pro-choice," "gun control" or "gun rights," a "balanced budget" or "the President's budget," are treated as non-negotiable. The phenomenon is as widespread as liberal democracy itself. In some countries, single-issue parties are formed and enjoy electoral success, though this tends to occur mainly in parliamentary systems based on proportional representation. In other countries such as the United States, well-established parties vie for the support of ever more idiosyncratic advocacy groups and their supporters. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of single-issue politics is the way voters are encouraged to cast votes according to a "litmus test"—that is, to go to the polls with one issue in mind and to support anyone who holds the desired stand on that issue, no matter what else he or she may stand for. The result is a titanic *bellum omnium contra omnes*, which, while occurring within institutionalized political structures, has little to do with politics in fact. All considerations of the political "whole" have been abandoned for special interests narrowly conceived. The goal is to *win*, not to balance competing goods in a publicly acceptable way through political deliberation.

To what extent have electoral politics been infected by single-issue and identity voting practices? Remarkably, researchers have not been able to answer this question, despite the fact that voting behavior is one of the most intensely studied and data-driven areas of political science. The problem in the United States is that our National Election Survey does not ask voters if they are driven by a single issue. The data are simply not available. Often, commentators try to claim that single-issue politics is "nothing new," that it's as old as the Abolition Movement in the United States (Flanigan and Zingale, 2010). But this is to miss the point. Not the origin but the sudden increase of single-issue politics is what is new. One way (admittedly indirect) to gauge the trend is to look at the growth of campaign contributions that come from groups that are narrowly defined in terms of one ideological or single-issue goal. According to one source, contributions to American political campaigns from individuals and political action committees associated with single-issue groups rose from $27.6 million in 1990 to $261.7 million in 2008, to $316.9 million in 2012, an increase of over 1,048% over the past 22 years.[8]

SOME LOGICAL POSTULATES

The three cases discussed above are merely indicative, not exhaustive, of a phenomenon that seems to be growing all the time. Certainly the instances could be multiplied, but let me now try to look behind the mere fact of dogmatomachy and consider some of its logical postulates. What must those engaged in this style of politics assume or believe in order to approach the political domain in this way? Of course the logical postulates behind any way of acting are myriad. But by hewing close to the phenomenon itself, without trying to peer too far behind it, we can highlight some postulates that prove quite revealing.

One postulate is unmistakable. It is a belief in the superiority of abstractions over embedded ideas and practices. What else could account for the process by which, in all three cases, something contextually rich and nuanced is transformed into something apparently released from all contingency? A tradition of rights, embedded in local compromises, practices and writs, is recast as a catalog of free-floating universal claims. A tradition of ethical reflection on war, embedded in various texts, historical contexts, and theological-philosophical frameworks, morphs into a barebones "just war theory" of supposedly universal application. A tradition of democratic political accommodation, embedded in various written and unwritten understandings of the best way for *this* people to live together, is transmogrified into an array of categorical imperatives ("issues"), each with its dogged defenders.

In all three cases, the process of abstraction is viewed as an improvement. Indeed, it has the appearance of a kind of magic operation, as in alchemy. Beginning with the base metals of a tradition, the ideologue performs his obscure rites, mumbling "*abstrahe, abstrahe*" (draw off, draw off), until, at last, he unveils something dazzlingly different from the raw materials with which he began, a pure doctrine. This is how "the criterion of last resort," "the right to life" and "single-issue politics" were born. Without the initial postulate that the abstract is better than the embedded, the process would not be nearly as ubiquitous as it appears today in democratic political life.

But are abstractions really better than embedded moral claims? No doubt abstractions seem more lucid and stark, and this has practical benefits: The clearer a moral or political doctrine, the more easily it can be taught and learned, and the more powerful it is for purposes of political debate. But such benefits come at a frightfully high cost. In fact, for every

degree of abstraction a moral insight undergoes, something is necessarily lost in its contact with human reality. Crucial nuances, caveats, and conditions are lost. And something is lost too in terms of coherence, as the three cases above well illustrate. These are not minor losses. They account, on the contrary, for a great deal of bad policy-making and unnecessary misunderstandings. In the case of the rights tradition, for example, people frequently enter the political fray today with radically false notions of what rights they actually possess and what a valid political outcome might entail. Often citizens believe they have been wronged or personally violated, when in fact all they have experienced is the everyday process of having to balance their preferences with those of others with whom they must coexist. The result is unnecessary political conflict and political instability.

But over-simplification and incoherence are not the only problems associated with political abstraction. Another problem, which arises when moral and political doctrines are torn from their original contexts, is that of groundlessness. At first, of course, the process of abstraction is perceived as strengthening the interests that are freed from all context. The heightened simplicity, clarity, and universality all seem to redound to their benefit. But eventually, some skeptic will be found to ask the pesky but inevitable question: "what is the ground of this claim?" And then, as if one suddenly realizes he is naked, a desperate search for cover occurs. It is amazing to consider how much ink has been spilt over the past century in the effort to find grounds for our homemade abstractions. The enormous scholarly literature on whether human rights are grounded in revelation, natural law, utilitarian considerations, or in Kantian deontology supplies one example of many. Once moral and political goods are severed from their actual grounds, and then later exposed as groundless, they seem suddenly more vulnerable to attack than was initially assumed. Abstraction suddenly appears as a weakness, not a strength. So we desperately search for grounds that will never seem satisfactory, because abstractions are *ex definitione* cut off from their grounds. It is as if we turn out the light and then complain that we cannot see.

Ultimately, the problem with the first postulate—that the abstract is better than the embedded—is that it is simply false. In mathematics, if someone can latch onto one truth, he can often use it to find others. For example if one element of a complex equation can be solved, it may be used to solve the rest. But moral and political "truths" are not like this. We cannot focus on one aspect of the human political terrain, abstracted from the overall context, and expect this to point the way to social harmony. This is because (to put it bluntly) humans are not numbers, and our affairs admit of irreducible contingency.[9] No doubt, we are frustrated by contingency. We wish for a degree of simplicity and universality that human moral claims do not actually possess. But to allow such frustrations to overwhelm us, to insist that the abstract is superior to the embedded when the results tell us otherwise, is to engage in a kind of intellectual dishonesty, all the worse for the disastrous political consequences.

Abstraction is a precondition for the second of dogmatomachy's logical postulates: the belief that the best, or at least a good, way to think about political goods is in terms of absolutes. To abstract a political good from its originating context is not yet to absolutize it. This requires a second step. To absolutize means to assert that something must be acknowledged unconditionally, to believe that it represents a solid piece of ethical reality such that it must not be compromised in the least by circumstances or even the presence of competing goods or principles. Again, the temptation to embrace this view lies in its promise of deliverance from complexity. Neither moral calculation nor political deliberation is necessary in a world of moral absolutes. The absolute itself serves as a talisman whose sacred properties guarantee the rightness of our cause. But of course moral and political absolutes do not deliver us from evil. They are in fact a kind of idealist fiction which, if taken too seriously, are more likely to plunge us headlong into the very evil we wish to avoid. I will not say that moral absolutes do not exist, though I admit I incline to this view. But they cannot be as abundant as our current style of politics suggests, or else we must admit to an incredibly tragic view of the cosmos, since we would be completely surrounded by logically incompatible and ontologically irresolvable moral imperatives.

The precise moment when the language of absolutes entered our moral discourse is difficult to pinpoint. The word itself ("absolute," a noun derived from the Latin verb *absolve*, "to set free") hails from the domain of metaphysics and mathematics. It refers evidently to something set free from contingency, as in the case of "2+2," which equals "4," no matter the circumstances. Among the great classical moralists: Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas all agreed in the non-absolute condition of the moral life. One must transcend human experience, including the entire domain of ethics, in order to find goods that are not contingent.[10] From the time of Hobbes forward, the language of absolutes can be documented with relative ease. But even here the details are telling. Hobbes's programmatic claim that "by nature every man has a right to everything" depends on a prior abstraction: the so-called natural condition of mankind, which in

fact does not exist. Hobbes's state of nature is a poetic image, forged for purposes of clarification. But like all abstractions, it obscures as well as illuminates. Similarly, the conception of "absolute sovereignty" which Hobbes attempts to construct is by his own admission "artificial," not natural, and it too admits of exceptions: absolute sovereignty dissolves when the sovereign cannot protect his people, or when he poses a threat to the life of any one of them. In Kant, by contrast, we find full-blown moral absolutes. But they depend for their force on Kant's rigid separation of the noumenal and phenomenal worlds and his eccentric insistence that what is true in theory must also be true in practice—a claim that reduces human ethics to the level of math and eschews all responsibility for the consequences.

Absolutes, then, seem to have some place either above or below human politics. If we can somehow escape the phenomenal world—or if we can create an artificial God, like Leviathan—then we can rest in absolutes. Or if we reduce the human condition to one of total unpredictability and animal desire, we can speak with Hobbes of absolute natural rights, short-lived though they turn out to be. But politics is a domain in which moral absolutes are by definition tempered by one very stubborn "condition"—if not by thousands of conditions: the inescapable presence of other people who do not embrace the same absolutes. Politics is, no doubt, messy and frustrating. But the escape we attempt through moral absolutism is a fictional one at best. I do not mean to imply that if citizens simply *talk* more and try harder to understand each other, political conflict will wither away. On the contrary, I do not believe it will. But the effort to escape from the trials and tribulations of political deliberation by appealing to the language of absolutes is not only unworkable but predictably calamitous. That is because, unlike mere abstractions, absolutized abstractions cannot be reconciled with one another. Precisely because they are absolutes—unconditional moral and political imperatives—they must be relentlessly pressed. Thus the postulate of absolutization supplies the "trigger," as it were, that sets dogmatomachy in motion.

Still, but for a third postulate of dogmatomachy, liberal democratic citizens might yet avoid the endless wars it generates. Observing the political havoc that abstraction and absolutization have wrought, we might be inclined to glance back with some humility at the assumptions that carried us to this point, and inquire whether we have perhaps been thinking about politics in the wrong way. But the third postulate of dogmatomachy seems to keep such humility in check. It consists in the belief that total victory of one deified absolute over another can easily be achieved. Let me now throw some critical light on this postulate by introducing the Titanomachy as a *comparatum*.

ZEUS AGAINST THE TITANS

In Greek mythology, the Titanomachy refers to the decade long war between the Titans and the Olympian gods, long before the existence of mankind. The war itself has a backstory. After Gaia (Earth) created and mated with Ouranos (Heaven), she bore three kinds of offspring: the Hekatonkheires (hundred-handers), the Cyclopes, and the Titans. But Ouranos imprisoned all but the Titans in Tartaros. Outraged, Gaia arranged for the youngest of the Titans, Kronos, to attack Ouranos with a sickle, to cut off his genitals and leave him to die—all of which Kronos did. He then freed all his siblings from Tartaros. But before Ouranos died, he uttered an ominous prophecy to Kronos: that just as Kronos had rebelled against his father's reign, so too would Kronos' children rebel against him. Coup d'état begets coup d'état. And thus began Kronos' own paranoid rulership of the cosmos. His first move was to re-imprison his siblings in Tartaros. His next was to ingest his own children after they were born from his wife Rhea. But Rhea—much like Gaia before her—found such behavior frustrating, to say the least. And before long, she tricked Kronos by serving him a blanket-clad rock to ingest instead of his youngest son, Zeus.

The story of the Titanomachy is one of brutal rule punctuated by violent rebellions. But the final victory of Zeus over his father, Kronos, would mark the end of this cycle. Of course, Zeus' rebellion against Kronos was as violent as previous revolutions. Pretending to be a servant, Zeus served Kronos a mixture of wine and mustard to make him vomit up the Olympian gods, who soon joined Zeus in battle against the Titans. Ultimately, with the help of Athena, Apollo and Artemis in particular, Zeus was able to cast the Titans headlong into Tartaros. But, significantly, Zeus did not betray his allies in the war. His was not a paranoid or brutal style of leadership, though it was certainly grounded in power. Rather, Zeus divided the world among his three brothers such that Poseidon had the sea, Hades the underworld and Zeus himself the heavens. All three could share the earth. And all the other Olympian gods and goddesses were given a unique role in a new *taxis* according to their natural proclivities and talents. Though this new "pantheon" of gods and goddess was not free from conflict, their discord was kept within bounds, because Zeus was so superior to the rest in strength that he could intervene decisively when

peace required. Indeed, as he reminds his fellow Olympians in Homer's account, he is so far stronger than all the rest, that if he fastened them to a chain, he could swing them all into the air at once, even if earth and sky were likewise attached, and leave them dangling there in space (Homer, *Iliad* VIII.1 ff).

Let us now consider the Titanomachy against the *comparandum*, ideological warfare. No doubt, the similarity is what strikes us first. Just as Zeus attempted to wrest control of the cosmos from all rivals, so do ideological elites today attempt to "win it all." The basic similarity thus aligns with the postulate of final victory. But the *comparatum* also reveals why that postulate is flawed. Two basic ontological facts make Zeus's victory possible. One is his decisively superior strength. The other is the existence of a place, Tartaros, where political enemies can be made to disappear. But neither of these facts obtains for man—especially not for liberal democratic man. As Hobbes most famously pointed out,

> the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he. For, as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself (*Leviathan*, chapter 13).

Human relations are thus characterized by a degree of natural equality that prevents us from resolving political conflict in the way Zeus seized control of the cosmos. We may try, even going so far as to dream of a mortal god, a Leviathan, whose power would surpass all. But this is ultimately impossible. The inescapable fact of rough human equality ensures that Olympian-style victories will not last. Nor can we, in any event, bury our enemies with anything like the finality of landing them in Tartaros. Murder may be attempted, or one might try to "eliminate the bloodline" as Machiavelli shockingly recommended. But avengers tend to emerge nonetheless. Perhaps mass murder, if undertaken systematically enough, could supply political coverage for a while, but even this proves less than perfectly final. In any event, liberal democratic countries have come to find the practice distasteful.

Now it may be objected that final victory does in fact occur in human relations, with the following examples cited as proof: the defeat of the Nazis in the Second World War, the defeat of institutionalized slavery in the American Civil War, and the substantial legislative and cultural victories of the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Does this not stand as evidence enough that final victory *is possible*? One observation will serve, I hope, to put these cases in perspective. It is that they all involved immense cultural upheaval and miserably tragic events that no one in his right mind would wish for. These are not normal cases. Rather the bare necessity of putting a stop to evil (in the case of National Socialism) and to unrelenting violent oppression (in the cases of slavery and civil rights) left the lovers of liberty with no reasonable alternative save "war," to make things right. But it does not follow that these are good paradigm cases for everyday political disagreement. On the contrary, they are the exceptions which prove the rule that dogmatomachy rarely settles anything and, anyway, takes far too much toll on human relationships and cultural institutions to be a normal way of approaching politics. In this light, it becomes clear that the problem with much of liberal democratic "politics" today is that we have lost the wisdom and the prudence to discern that not every conflict is an extreme case.

Returning, then, to the Titanomachy, the differences between Zeus and mortal men do indeed help clarify the way human politics should be understood in all but the rarest cases of violent oppression. We should not copy Zeus. For we shall rarely succeed in eliminating our rivals once and for all, or in unilaterally creating a stable *taxis* of our own liking. The postulate of total victory is for the most part a dangerous illusion. And yet our dogmatomachies rage on as if some kind of conclusion were easily achievable—as if our most basic political focus should be on pushing our militant causes one step closer to total victory. What we are in fact doing is naively disregarding the end game. Our political armies look only to the next election cycle or the next case before the judiciary. Our outlook is thus not only partial, but myopic. We all seem to believe that somehow, as if by magic, a near-term victory will settle the differences among us once and for all. But this is folly. The postulate of total victory can be maintained in domestic politics only by refusing to differentiate the extreme from less extreme cases and by refusing take the long view.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

What I have described so far is a political problem of considerable scale, along with some logical postulates that stand behind it. Logical postulates are not exactly "causes." They reveal what must be in the minds of those who engage in this style of political warfare—prior assumptions, beliefs, expectations. But to ask why this style of politics has increased

in recent decades is to ask a different kind of question; it is to seek a historical, not a logical set of preconditions. Why, we might ask, have the postulates relating to abstraction, absolutization and total victory become more widely characteristic of politics today than in the not-so-distant past? On this score, I can only conjecture. I am not sure that anything more rigorous than conjecture is possible.[11] Still, I would be surprised if the following amalgam of historical factors has not contributed something significant to the rise of dogmatomachy.

The first is not an historical event per se, but a process whereby political wisdom gradually dissolves over time. When political insights are first achieved, they are almost always prompted by rare events. From the experience of the English Civil War, we learn something of the value of toleration. From the experience of violent oppression, we learn to savor freedom. But as political insights are conveyed from one generation to the next, they tend (quite naturally) to become diluted. The stories and precepts we communicate to the young are less vivid than the original experiences. And as generations go by, we end up with little more than ghostly shadows of former wisdom.

> *Those who knew*
> *what was going on here*
> *must make way for*
> *those who know little.*
> *And less than little.*
> *And finally as little as nothing* (Szymborska, 2002).

Typically, these shadows take the form of abstract concepts. We know that we stand for "toleration," "freedom" and "equality," but we do not know why we cherish these goods or how to temper them in concrete political contexts. They are the desiccated relics of a more embodied political wisdom from the past. Now, this comes quite close to the process of abstraction identified above, but I am arguing here that it is a natural, even inevitable historical process. In fact, the political philosopher Eric Voegelin has studied this process with great care and referred to it, not surprisingly, as one of "dogmatization" and "doctrinal hardening." Hannah Arendt focused on it as well, and referred to it as "reification."[12] This is likely to be one factor in the rise of dogmatomachy.

But if dogmatization occurs all the time, then it seems incapable of explaining the sudden spike in dogmatomachy in recent decades. Let me therefore introduce another factor, which might contribute to our present situation. It is the waning of common experiences among citizens of liberal democratic countries, a problem that modern technology has only made worse. In comparison to the citizens of ancient Athens, for example, who had their public festivals, saw each other daily in the agora and fought side-by-side in war, contemporary democratic citizens scarcely have a single common experience. We each listen to different music, read different books, watch different movies. We allow a professional army to fight our wars. And now social networking media have enabled us to surround ourselves exclusively with like-minded "friends," while blocking out everyone else. Television and news programs increasingly cater to specific demographics and narrowly defined ideological types. The result is that we simultaneously become more diverse and less schooled by our diversity. How often have we heard of fellow citizens who become outraged when they learn that people elsewhere in their polity do not cherish the same values as they? Have we not reached the point where most of us regard large numbers of our fellow citizens as "beyond the pale?" We attempt to silence those we do not like, hoping to remove them from public view—denying them airtime—as they attempt to do the same to us. Thus the historical trend toward atomization, or at least a more highly fractured social environment, seems to contribute directly to the problem.

A final explanation, which I take to be the most illuminating, is a change in the way Western democratic peoples view the nature of government. In the eighteenth century, when liberal ideas and movements were initially spreading across Europe, Britain, and the United States, the concept of "limited government" was widely embraced for two reasons. On the one hand, people knew firsthand how much havoc could be wrought by overreaching monarchs, and they wished to keep this cancer in check. On the other hand, they were witnessing (also firsthand) the astonishing degree of creativity and economic growth that occurs when governments leave people free to use their capital and ingenuity as they see fit, without undue interference. The shift in liberal philosophy away from the idea of limited government to the idea of a powerfully active government which must intervene in private affairs in order to ensure desired outcomes is a fairly recent phenomenon. In much of Europe that shift occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century in response to the needs of an enormous underclass that was suffering from the upheavals and dislocations of the Industrial Revolution. In America, the change came much later for a number of reasons, including our founding commitment to Lockean principles of classical liberalism.[13] But it came nonetheless when, during the Great Depression, unemployment rates reached such heights that to do nothing seemed counter-productive

and callous. So America too went the way of European liberalism, and the result has been a steady—indeed meteoric—rise in the size, scope and power of government ever since.[14]

But there is a downside to this, which has largely gone unanalyzed. When governments are as powerful and involved in private affairs as they are in liberal democratic countries today, when they are willing to support *some* private ideals and enterprises at the expense of others, when the possession of this awesome power is up for grabs during every election cycle, what naturally occurs is that everyone wants to win that power—or, put differently, no one can afford to lose it. The stakes are simply too high. This was not a problem when government was "limited," because the sorts of things that governments did were for the most part boring. But today, government is far from boring. It is the most compelling show in town, one in which competing factions relish the chance to lord it over all others as long as possible. And under such conditions, how could citizens think of politics as anything else but war? Currently, the war is mostly waged by means of money and words. More than six billion dollars was spent in 2012 by the combined American presidential candidates in their titanic effort to knock each other out of contention.[15] Politics today often seems to ignore the common good and to focus only on winners and losers, tearing the culture apart rather than bringing it together. And yet there's no end in sight, no "end game" that promises to release us from the destructive impulses that have been let loose.

THE THEORIST'S GAZE

People naturally want to fix the problems they see, and I confess to wondering if any remedy might be found for the predicament in which we find ourselves. Because human beings are not machines, or inanimate objects, the mere understanding of a problem can often contribute to its solution. Surely it is in our power to recognize the absurdity of the logical postulates behind dogmatomachy—the postulates of abstraction, absolutization and total victory. Surely we can, if we will, abandon them. But for various reasons such a change of heart and mind is not likely to occur anytime soon. Like a marriage that has turned sour, political associations that devolve into war are hard to put right again. The good will is gone, the trust, the pride in the collective identity. It was in times like these that the ancients called upon a lawgiver—a Lycurgus, Solon or Moses—to create something new and well-ordered without the daunting challenge of having to reform ourselves for ourselves. But lawgivers like these are in short supply today.

Still, the problem seems to me chiefly constitutional. As long as the power of government is simultaneously all-determining and up for grabs, the result will be bitter conflict. Thomas Hobbes understood this more clearly than anyone. That is why he attempted to remove political power into the hands of a third party, as superior to the would-be political competitors as a god is to man. At the same time, he tried to emphasize a "limited" conception of the reach of government—not its power (which is absolute), but its scope. One almost pities the poor Hobbesian sovereign when one learns that his awesome, absolute power to make laws is to be exercised mainly in the manner of a gardener, trimming the hedges along the road so as to keep travelers "in the way" (*Leviathan*, ch. 30). This has nothing of the excitement or adventure that attends the art of lawmaking today. Who would want to govern if it did not mean the ability to help your friends and harm your enemies, to have a dream and compel others to live it?

The psychological underpinnings of dogmatomachy, which amount to little more than the love of power and the belief that we are gods, are a permanent feature of the human condition. They are not so much the *cause* of dogmatomachy as they are contributing factors. The logical underpinnings are similarly perennial, but they seem to flare up from time to time. We can expose the folly of abstract, absolutist, winner-take-all politics, but people will do what they will do. We should know from experience that cultures do not change their thoughts and practices simply because these appear incoherent or irrational to some academic observer. But, in any event, the change in the way we *understand* government—as active rather than limited—seems to be curable. And this has created the conditions under which the logical and psychological factors can thrive. My hunch, however, is that things are going to get worse before they get better. What we seem to have forgotten is a piece of political wisdom from the dawn of the liberal era. Before there were ideological wars, there were religious wars, and a great amount of bloodletting took place before people came to the conclusion that war was a colossal waste of time and energy; and that, perhaps, we should rather limit the role that government plays in religion (and *vice versa*). Not only has the broader lesson been forgotten—that limited government is better than war—but the specific lesson about religion is slipping from our grasp as well. This bodes ill for the decades to come, because political wisdom renews itself not through book-learning or through college lectures, but through the

pain of experience. "*Wenn die Philosophie ihr Grau in Grau malt, dann ist eine Gestalt des Lebens alt geworden, und mit Grau in Grau lässt sie sich nicht verjüngen, sondern nur erkennen*."[16] Perhaps, then, only when our dogmatomachies get worse, much worse, will we begin to recover the practice of politics that suits human beings rather than gods.

NOTES

1 Mephistopheles in Goethe, *Faust*, Part 1, lines 2038–9: "My worthy friend, gray are all theories/ And green alone life's golden tree."

2 This is a method I borrow from Michael Oakeshott (1975).

3 "Dogmatomachy," from the Greek, *dogma* (an opinion that falls short of knowledge) and *machē* (battle) is a neologism I draw from the writings of the late political philosopher, Eric Voegelin. Voegelin used this colorful and philosophically pregnant term in passing without developing it. See for example his lectures, "The Drama of Humanity," (in Voegelin, 2004), esp. pp. 174-177; and his essay, "What is Political Reality," (in Voegelin, 2006), esp. pp. 385-391.

4 The Greek *dikaios eimi* with the infinitive means "I have a right to do" or "am bound to do." The Latin *jus* can also be used to designate a personal right, and was so used in Justinian's *Digest* at least 294 times, as pointed out by Donahue (2001), pp. 506-35.

5 Dershowitz (2004), pp. 166-168, lists 50 incompatible rights. The examples above are selected from his.

6 See Walzer (2006), pp. 155, 160-161, who rightly complains that "lastness" is too often invoked as if it were a metaphysical principle that can never be reached in real life; it is invoked "as an excuse for postponing the use of force indefinitely." But last resort really means simply this: "Look hard for alternatives before you 'let loose the dogs of war.'"

7 A classic study is Schlesinger (1991).

8 http://www.opensecrets.org/industries/totals.php?cycle=2010&ind=Q. OpenSecrets.Org's Center for Representative Politics gathers data from the Federal Election Commission and compiles it each year.

9 Auden (1948), p. 61, deftly contrasts two worlds: the world of "identical relations and recurrent events, describable, not in words but in terms of numbers," and the world of "faces, analogical relations and singular events, describable only in terms of speech."

10 When God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac—a command which Abraham is willing to obey—God is testing Abraham's "fear," not his commitment to moral absolutes (see Gen. 22:12). Christ's Sermon on the Mount has something of the flavor of absolutes. But Christ never describes them as such, and they must, in any event, be reconciled with competing moral strictures from elsewhere in the gospels, as St. Augustine

famously showed in his seminal reflections on war: Sometimes the counsel to "turn the other cheek," if taken absolutely, violates the demands of charity.

11 Readers of Oakeshott and Voegelin will know that each thinker offered careful historical accounts of the rise of phenomena similar to what I call dogmatomachy. Oakeshott traced modern "Rationalism" back to the dawn of the modern era and to the inordinate quest for certainty that the upheavals of modernity wrought. Voegelin similarly traced the origins of modern "ideology" to the early-modern rise of scientism and the collapse of imperial Christianity in the West. I find both accounts plausible and illuminating. But I am looking for a more proximate explanation for a spike in ideological warfare that is decades old, not centuries old.

12 See, Voegelin (1974), pp. 39, 56; and Arendt (1957), p. 95: "always the 'dead letter' replaces something which grew out of and for a fleeting moment indeed existed as the 'living spirit.'" Arendt, however, is equivocal about this process since, without reification human action, speech and thought would not be remembered. In order to remember, we reify. But then the object of remembrance is different from the experience itself.

13 On which Hartz (1955) is still illuminating.

14 Tragically, the American political tradition includes a unique teaching that makes dogmatomachy much worse for us, once the idea of limited government is abandoned. It is the way we have always thought of factions, following James Madison in *Federalist* 10, as cancelling each other out under conditions of competition. On this theory, the common good is supposed to emerge from factional strife, like a phoenix rising up from the ashes. But in fact, the theory of factions in *Federalist* 10 has not worked. And what has happened instead is that American citizens wage political war against each other with an utterly clear conscience.

15 The Center for Responsive Politics calculates the total cost at $ 6.3 billion. They reported $5.8 billion for the 2008 race and $880 million for 2004.

16 Hegel (1911), p. 17: "When philosophy paints its gray in gray, then has a form of life become old. With philosophy's gray in gray it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood."

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