THE DIALECTICS OF INDIVIDUALISM AND TOTALITARIANISM IN CHARLES DE KONINCK AND DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

Edmund Waldstein, O.Cist.

1. MARATHE AND STEEPLY

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the publication of David Foster Wallace’s intricate, 1000+ page novel *Infinite Jest*, about students of an elite tennis-academy, inmates of a halfway-house for drug addicts and alcoholics, and a group of Quebecoise separatist terrorists in a dystopian near-future “experialist” “Organization of North American Nations” (O.N.A.N.), in which calendar years are named after corporate sponsors, and an ‘entertainment’ has been produced that is so compelling that it distracts people to death. Written at the apogee of neoliberal triumph, shortly after Francis Fukuyama had proclaimed the end of history, *Infinite Jest* is meant to be a description of the deep sadness and loneliness of that apparently triumphant moment. In a book review written while he was working on *Infinite Jest*, Wallace wrote of the book he was reviewing something that could just as well be applied to the book he was writing:

[It] can map or picture the desacralized & paradoxical solipsism of U.S. persons in a cattle-herd culture that worships only the Transparent I, of guiltily passive solipsists & skeptics trying to warm soft hands at the computer-enhanced fire of data in an Information Age where received image & enforced eros replace active countenance or sacral mystery as ends, value, meaning.¹

In extending the trajectory of his movement into an exaggerated near-future Wallace tries to show the full horror of the loneliness and meaninglessness of individualistic culture. But his near-future also shows the shadow of another horror that he seems to have feared even more: namely that the sadness of individualistic liberalism will cause the culture to suddenly swing to its opposite: totalitarian tyranny.

Indeed, experialist America is administered by Johnny Gentle, an entertainer-turned-politician, who has come to power by pledging to get rid of the mountains of filth produced by limitless consumerism, by creating a giant wasteland near the Northern border and forcing Canada, as the weaker member of O.N.A.N., to annex that wasteland (hence “experialist”). Gentle is a comic figure, whom one can scarcely take seriously. Reading *Infinite Jest* in 2016 it is hard not to think of Donald Trump: a demagogue and clown, who exploits the despair induced by the tensions of late-capitalism for the gratification of his ego-mania. There are however other anti-individualist voices in *Infinite Jest* that make a better case for their position than Gentle.

There is Gehard Schtitt: the intellectual German mastermind behind the pedagogy of the tennis academy:

Schtitt: like most Europeans of his generation, anchored from infancy to certain permanent values which — yes, OK, granted — may, admittedly, have a whiff of proto-fascist potential about them, but which do, nevertheless (the values), anchor nicely the soul and course of a life — Old World patriarchal stuff like honor and discipline and fidelity to some larger unit. [...]

This is a vision that is able to convince some of his highly intelligent and well-to-do students. One of those students, Ortho (“The Darkness”) Stice, instructs a group of even younger students as follows:

It’s about discipline and sacrifice and honor to something way bigger than your personal ass. He’ll mention America. He’ll talk patriotism and don’t think he won’t. He’ll talk about it’s patriotic play that’s the high road to the thing. He’s not American but I tell you straight out right here he makes me proud to be American. *Mein kinder*. He’ll say it’s how to learn to be a good American during a time, boys, when America isn’t good its own self.

And above all, looking down on it all, is the Quebecoise terrorist Rémy Marathe. Marathe sits in his wheelchair on a ridge overlooking Tucson, Arizona, and talks to Steeply an experialist American secret agent. Their long conversation, interspersed throughout the novel, “overlooks” and comments on many of the main themes. Steeply presents the liberal-individualist vision in which what ultimately matters is individual desire and its satisfaction. Marathe on the other hand, presents an ideal of human life as consisting in giving oneself to a higher

---

3 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 120.
cause: a community of which one is a part. They discuss the Trojan war, and Marathe disagrees with Steeply (and with Homer) about its causes:

‘The point is that what launches vessels of war is the state and community and its interests,’ Marathe said without heat, tiredly. ‘You only wish to enjoy to pretend for yourself that the love of one woman could do this, launch so many vessels of alliance.’

But Steeply counters that one should not be so sure, individual passion can be so strong that one is willing to give all for it. The “fanatically patriotic Wheelchair Assassins of southern Quebec” underestimate the power of passion. Marathe latches on to the word “fanatic.” “Fanatic,” he says, is derived from the Latin for “temple” (fanum), and means literally “worshiper at the temple.” All of us he argues have a “temple”, something that we love, something that we “invest with faith”. It is thus of supreme importance what we choose as our temple: “For this choice determines all else. No? All other of our you say free choices follow from this.” And to choose an individual beloved person as that object of worship is irrational:

Die for one person? This is a craziness. Persons change, leave, die, become ill. They leave, lie, go mad, have sickness, betray you, die. Your nation outlives you. A cause outlives you. [...] You U.S.A.’s do not seem to believe you may each choose what to die for. Love of a woman, the sexual, it bends back in on the self, makes you narrow, maybe crazy. Choose with care. Love of your nation, your country and people, it enlarges the heart. Something bigger than the self.

Steeply questions whether the temple of worship is really a matter of deliberate choice: “What if you just love? without deciding? You just do: you see her and in that instant are lost to sober account-keeping and cannot choose but to love?”

Marathe answers with a sniff of disdain:

Then in such a case your temple is self and sentiment. Then in such an instance you are a fanatic of desire, a slave to your individual subjective narrow self's sentiments; a citizen of nothing. You become a citizen of nothing. You are by yourself and alone, kneeling to yourself. [...] In a case such as this you become the slave who believes he is free. The most pathetic of bondage. Not tragic. No songs. You believe you would die twice for another but in truth would die only for your alone self, its sentiment.
Marathe’s critique of American individualism is born out by the rest of the novel, which describes in painful detail the loneliness, suffering, and slavery to base passion that run rampant in individualist society. But Wallace does not portray Marathe’s terrorist sect, with its austere, Spartan spirit as an attractive alternative. On my reading Wallace’s thinks that American society is ripe for a turn to Fascist totalitarianism, and that this would be even worse than what they have got.

2. CHARLES DE KONINCK AGAINST THE PERSONALISTS

_Infinite Jest_ gives narrative plausibility to the attractiveness of totalitarian ideas and movements in an individualistic culture. But of course, Steeply’s individualism and Marathe’s totalitarianism are not the only options. Wallace himself gives hints at a third option. But I want to turn now to a philosopher who gave who gave an account of what the deficiencies of individualistic and totalitarian thought, and of how those deficiencies should (at least on at the level of thought) be overcome: Charles de Koninck, a Belgian-Canadian Thomist philosopher who taught at the university of Laval in Quebec. De Koninck’s seminal work _On the Primacy of the Common Good: Against the Personalists_ (1943) was written toward the end of World War II, and was one of several ambitious projects by Catholic philosophers to articulate a “third option” apart from individualism and totalitarianism. Another one of those attempts is mentioned in his title: personalism. Before considering de Koninck’s own work, therefore, I will give a very brief account of “personalism” in the sense in which he uses it.

“Personalism” comes in many flavors, and it became popular during the war among those French Catholic thinkers in France who were affected by the anti-totalitarian reaction that the atrocities of National Socialist Germany caused. In the first half of the 20th century one can see a kind of oscillation between individualism and totalitarianism. When World War I broke out to rejoicing on the streets of many European capitals: at last a great cause to which one could give oneself, after the pusillanimity and meaninglessness of the long 19th century and its triumphant capitalism! But then the bitter reality of the war leads to a swing back towards liberalism. And then after the post-war economic bubble burst in the great depression you have a turn against liberal individualism and toward Fascism and National Socialism. In the party program of the Nazi Party the words “The Common Interest before the Self” are printed in bold. But then again the unprecedented evil of really existing National Socialism leads to a return to the liberal individualism of the post-war West.

This oscillation was not without influence on Catholic intellectual circles. One thinker who felt this influence very strongly was the famous Thomist Jacques Maritain. After his conversion Maritain had been an adherent of the right-wing totalitarian movement Action Française. But after the Holy See condemned the Action he became an ardent democrat. He became friends with many leading personalists, including Emmanuel Mounier, and developed his own form of personalism.

Maritain’s personalism is based on a distinction between “individual” and “person.” What is an individual?

The word individual [...] is common to man and beast, to plant, microbe, and atom. [I]ndividuality as such is based on the peculiar needs of matter, the principle of individuation because it is the principle of division, because it requires to occupy a position and have a quantity, by which that which here will differ from that which is there. So that in so far as we are individuals we are only a fragment of matter, a part of this universe, distinct, no doubt, but a part [...] 11

The word person, on the other hand, refers to man’s spiritual nature, by which he transcends the whole universe. As an individual, man is a part of a greater whole, but as a person he is not. This has political consequences:

according to the principles of St. Thomas, it is because he is first an individual of a species that man, having need of the help of his fellows to perfect his specific activity, is consequently an individual of the city, a member of society. And on this count he is subordinated to the good of his city as to the good of the whole, the common good which as such is more divine and therefore better deserving the love of each than his very own life. But if it is a question of the destiny which belongs to a man as a person, the relation is inverse, and it is the human city which is subordinate to his destiny. [...] Thus the individual in each one of us, taken as an individual member of the city, exists for his city, and ought at need to sacrifice his life for it, as for instance in a just war. But taken as a person whose destiny is God, the city exists for him, to wit, for the advancement of the moral and spiritual life and the heaping up of divine goods; for that is the very end of personality; and it is only by virtue of this that the city has its common good. 12

The error of individualism, according to Maritain, is that it accords to the individual the rights that belong by nature to the person. But since the individual is in fact a part of the social whole, he argues that individualism has a natural tendency to flip over into totalitarianism:

---

12 Maritain, Three Reformers, p. 22.
we shall see individualism culminate quite naturally in the monarchic tyranny of a Hobbes, the democratic tyranny of a Rousseau or the tyranny of the “Providence-State” and the “God-State” of a Hegel and his disciples.13

De Koninck’s book seems to have been directed against the fashionable Maritainism that he encountered in Catholic circles in Quebec.14 De Koninck argues that the principle that personal good of the man transcends his common good concedes too much to individualism. Practically speaking, this principle vitiates the principle of the primacy of the common good, so strong in perennial philosophy. How can one practically distinguish between man as individual and man as person? In practice Maritainism will mean the subordination of the common to the private.

De Koninck argues that the reason why personalism goes astray is that it considers the person and society in their being rather than in their telos, their end, their perfection.15 The common good, de Koninck argues is not the good of a society considered as a kind of super-individual, a giant substance composed of substances. Rather, the common good is a common end pursued and shared in by all its members. The highest goods of man are common goods: goods that he cannot have by himself, but only in communion with others:

This desire for the common good is in the singular itself. Hence the common good does not have the character of an alien good—bonum alienum—as in the case of the good of another considered as such. Is it not this which, in the social order, distinguishes our position profoundly from collectivism, which latter errs by abstraction, by demanding an alienation from the proper good as such and consequently from the common good since the latter is the greatest of proper goods? Those who defend the primacy of the singular good of the singular person are themselves supposing this false notion of the common good.16

---

13 Maritain, Three Reformers, p. 22.
15 “The main reason why many a personalist has been irked by my essay is that it took him off-guard. Instead of discussing the problem in terms of ‘person’ and ‘society’, I approach it in the fundamental terms of ‘proper good’ and ‘common good’. Ultimately, person and society are not to be judged by what they are absolutely, but by what is their perfection, i.e. by what is their good; that is the only way in which Aristotle and St. Thomas ever discussed this problem. To look upon the absolute comparison of person and society as the most basic consideration is distinctly modern.” (Charles de Koninck, “In Defence of Saint Thomas: A Reply to Father Eschmann’s Attack on the Primacy of the Common Good,” in: Laval théologique et philosophique 1.2 (1945), pp. 9-109, at pp. 92-93.
There are two kinds of goods: there are goods that de Koninck calls “private goods” like food and clothing and money that are diminished by being shared. If Clarence gives Tom part of his ice cream, then the part of the ice cream that Tom has Clarence no longer has. Clarence can no longer enjoy the part of the ice cream that he gave away. Such goods are “private” because they can only belong to one person to the exclusion of others. A private good is ordered to the one whose good it is. In loving a private good, one is actually loving the person for whom that good is intended. Aristotle says (Nicomachean Ethics, 1155b30) that one does not really wish wine well—one wishes rather that the wine will keep so that one might enjoy; i.e. one is really wishing oneself well. And this is because wine is a private good. A common good on the other hand is a good that is not diminished by being shared. Goods such as truth and justice and peace are common goods in the full sense. They are not diminished by being shared. If Tom gives knowledge of the truth to Clarence, he does not thereby diminish his own share.

True common goods are not ordered to us; we are ordered to them. One desires to promote justice and truth for their own sakes. And they are better than private goods. As Aristotle says, it is honorable to attain a good for one man, but it is better and more godlike to attain a good in which many can share (cf. Nicomachean Ethics 1094b). The common good is not better merely as a sum of the private goods of many individuals. But nor is it the good of their community considered as a quasi-individual; rather a true common good is good for each of the persons who partake of it—a good to which they are ordered. This cannot be emphasized enough: the common good is a personal good. The subordination of persons to this good is thus not enslaving. They are not being ordered to someone else’s good (the good of ‘the nation’ or ‘humanity,’ considered abstractly), rather they are ordered to their own good, but a good that they can only have together with a community. The common good is a universal cause in the order of final causality. And the fact that it extends its causality to more effects than a private good does shows how much better it is.

The highest common good is God Himself, who is shared by all who attain to the beatific vision. And this shows why de Koninck is so opposed to personalism. If the highest good were not a common good it would follow that each person would order God to himself. It would follow that each person would have to consider himself the center of the universe. On the contrary persons are ordered to God, not the other way around. De Koninck quotes an important passage of St. Thomas that is worth quoting at length:

The philosopher says in Book Eight of the Politics that in order to be a good political [person] one must love the good of the city. [...] Now one can love the good of a city in two ways: in one way to possess it, in another that it might be preserved. If someone loves the good of a city in order to have and own it, he is not a good political person, because in this way even a tyrant loves the good of a city, in order to dominate it, which is to love oneself more than the city. He wants this good for himself, not for the city.

But to love the good of the city that it might be kept and defended, this is truly to love the city and this makes a person a good political person, so much so that some expose themselves to the danger of death and neglect their private good in order to preserve or increase the good of the city. In the same way, to love the good that is participated by the blessed, to love it so as to have or possess it, does not establish the right relation between a person and blessedness, because even evil people want this good.

But to love that good according to itself, that it may remain and be shared out and that nothing be done against this good, this gives to a person the right relation to that society of the blessed. And this is love [caritas] which loves God for his sake and the neighbors, who are capable of blessedness, as oneself.18

De Koninck’s conception shows the deficiencies of both individualism and totalitarianism, and why one is liable to flip into the other. Both individualism and totalitarianism are founded on the same misunderstanding of the common good. In both the common good is seen as a bonum alienum, a good that is not really the good of the members of society, but rather external good that is in some way opposed to the individual good. In individualism the common good (thus misunderstood) is then subordinated to the private goods of individuals, becoming an instrument of individual desires, and debasing politics into an art of balancing private interests. In totalitarianism, on the other hand, the individual is subordinated to the good of the collective, thus debasing the human person to the status of a means to an extrinsic end. Since man is made for common goods that are really his personal goods, totalitarian regimes will always be experienced as alienating and enslaving, and thus persons in totalitarian societies long for the apparent freedom of individualism. But since man is made for personal goods that are common goods, individualism will always be experienced as unsatisfying and pusillanimous, and this leads to the plausibility of totalitarianism.

18 Q.D. de Virtutibus, 2.2 c.; translation Michael Waldstein.
3. **The Pale King**

In his unfinished last novel, *The Pale King*, David Foster Wallace gives some hints about a third option apart from individualism and totalitarianism.¹⁹ He describes a group of tax bureaucrats stuck in an elevator, who are talking about the changes in the IRS brought about by the Reagan administration – changes aimed at running the IRS like a capitalist corporation. The idea is that it is useless to treat the US citizen as a *citizen* as a part of a larger community with responsibility for the common good of that community; instead he has to be treated as a *customer* who receives certain services from the government and is required to pay for them. The bureaucrats see this change as being made possible the way in which US citizens have in fact come to see themselves:

> We've changed the way we think of ourselves as citizens. We don’t think of ourselves as citizens in the old sense of being small parts of something larger and infinitely more important to which we have serious responsibilities. [...] Something has happened where we've decided on a personal level that it’s all right to abdicate our individual responsibility to the common good, and let government worry about the common good while we all go about our individual self-interested business and struggle to gratify our various appetites.²⁰

The bureaucrats contrast this with what they see as the attitude of the American founding fathers:

> The fact is that [the founding fathers] cared more about the nation and the citizens than about themselves. [...] They assumed their descendants would be like them—rational, honorable, civic-minded. Men with at least as much concern for the common good as for personal advantage.²¹

Wallace thus portrays them as trying to find a solution to individualism within the liberal tradition of the American founding itself. But Wallace himself notes a certain irony in any such attempt:

> It was in the 1830s and '40s that states started granting charters of incorporation to larger and regulated companies. And it was 1840 or '41 that de Tocqueville published his book about Americans, and he says somewhere that one thing about democracies and their individualism is that they by their very nature corrode the citizen's sense of true community, of having real true fellow citizens whose interests and concerns were the same as his. This is a kind of ghastly irony, if you think about it, since a form of government engineered to produce equality makes


²¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 133-134
its citizens so individualistic and self-absorbed they end up as solipsists, navel-gazers.\textsuperscript{22}

One could phrase the problem as follows: Although there are elements of ancient republican common good thinking in the American founders, their thought contained individualistic elements as well, and that the individualistic elements were primary. They saw the purpose of political society as the safeguard of individual rights. Thus subordinating the common to the private. Thus I claim that the attempt to find a solution to the ills of individualism within the liberal tradition of the Enlightenment is doomed to failure. To really recover an adequate politics of the common good would be to reject modern liberal politics altogether.

\textsuperscript{22} Wallace, \textit{The Pale King}, p. 141.