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# Ancient Lectures on Political Philosophy

## Political Advice from Blaise Pascal, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and C.S. Lewis

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In this essay, which is centered around political philosophy, I share political advice from three different individuals—intellectuals, scholars, and philosophers—that I greatly admire and from whom there is a great deal to be learned.<sup>1</sup> These three scholars have all given lectures to various audiences and those lectures have been passed down. Reading them provides some semblance of actually getting to listen to the scholars themselves. The first scholar I discuss is Blaise Pascal, the 17th century French mathematician and philosopher, followed by Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, and finishing with C.S. Lewis.

### 1. Blaise Pascal

In 1670, Pascal gives three lectures to a duke, and in those lectures, he gives him advice on how to be a good ruler—how to be a good duke. He shares the first piece of advice by way of allegory, which is a very biblical method of teaching. Pascal tells the duke the following story. Once upon a time, there was a simple man living a simple life. One morning, the man wakes up and discovers, much to his surprise, that he is not in his own bed. Instead, he was on the shore of an island. He had no idea how he had been transported to the island, and in fact, he did not recognize the island at all. He had never been there before. To add to the situation, he did not know how to leave the island. The man feels very disturbed and lost. Soon, though, he comes to find out that the island has a king that is loved by all, and that said king has mysteriously disappeared. As coincidence

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is part of a larger book project (in progress).

would have it, this lost and confused man looks remarkably similar to the king that is so loved by the people of the island.

Believing that this man is their king, they all happily celebrate his return. This man thinks to himself, “I am a simple man and where I come from, this is an incredible dream. I will accept their notions and continue to pose as their king, given that that’s what they already believe.” But the man remains cognizant of the fact that, regardless of how the people treat him with all the privileges he is allowed and the reverence he receives, he is not actually their king. He is just a normal person.

Pascal tells the duke, “This is the situation you are in. You are a duke and with that comes authority, properties, and the various privileges of ruling over your subjects, but you must always remember that you are just an ordinary man. You are just like all of your subjects.

This is the 17th century and Pascal is not revolutionary by any means. He supports the aristocracy and the system through which one can become a duke and enjoy the associated privileges of such a title. Pascal is simply making clear the importance of remembering the similarities between a duke and his subjects and that it is crucial not to become too proud.

This first piece of advice that Pascal gives the duke also applies to our leaders in business and politics and extends even further to the everyday person. It is important for people to remember that no one is entitled to their talents, properties or privileges. Pascal is very conservative, far from Marx and Engels’ concept of property as theft, but he is saying that it is important to be fair and honest.

The second piece of advice that Pascal gives is related to a differentiation that he makes—the difference between what he calls the greatness of establishment and the greatness of nature. Establishment is everything that’s related to, in the case of the duke, his title, his property, and the institution that gives him this position. Pascal tells the duke, “When I speak to you, I kneel down as a result of your greatness of establishment. It is what you deserve because you are a duke.” The greatness of nature, however, is very different. Pascal then talks about a mathematician that he believes to be better than himself. He explains that the mathematician has greatness of nature because his greatness is based on the man’s merits. Through this comparison, Pascal conveys to the duke that as a ruler, he should strive to be honored because of his accomplishments and his merits rather than be honored simply as a result of his position.

So, the second piece of advice Pascal gives the duke is regarding how to be a good ruler. This advice is not all similar to that of which Niccolò Machiavelli gave to the prince he worked for. The key difference between their two sets of advice is that Machiavelli’s was much more interested in methods for conquering and maintaining power, and how utilizing manipulation and deceit can help one achieve those goals. Pascal’s advice, however, was in no way perverse. Instead, he provides a different approach—one that is moral and based on values and principles.

In his third and final piece of advice, Pascal tells the duke that in order to be a good ruler, he must satisfy the needs and desires of his subjects. In so doing, he will avoid being an autocrat that abuses power and takes advantage of his subjects, and instead will be making an honest attempt to meet

the needs of his people. Pascal goes on to explain that following this path is the minimum requirement for being a good ruler, but if he wants to be an excellent ruler, he will have to do more than that. He tells him that in order to be a good ruler, he must lead his subjects towards charity. He elaborates, telling the duke, “You need to go beyond just satisfying the needs and desires of your subjects. You need to lead them to understand and to overcome their primitive desires. You need to make them less selfish and more altruistic, less worried about their own needs and more interested in serving others. This is what I mean by leading your subjects towards charity.”

## 2. Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer

Next, I discuss Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, a Dutch reformed statesman in the 19th century who gave a famous series of lectures called *Unbelief and Revolution*. In these lectures, he provides advice and helpful governing principles to rulers, all of which can apply to a variety of areas such as politics, business, economics, and even the personal sphere.

The first and most important thing that Groen van Prinsterer underlines in his work is his call for social transformation. He invites everyone to work towards it. This concept appears in the creation narrative in both the Old and New Testament as well as in literature, and is rather simple: God transforms something ugly into something beautiful. That is a central idea in the biblical myth of creation, but the narrative itself is actually about re-creation. It suggests that something was already there, and that something was dirty and dark, difficult and ugly. God then took that something and transformed it into something beautiful. In the New Testament, this concept appears in a different way in that Jesus’ death, tragic and awful, held great meaning and promise. Jesus’ death, something negative, gave way for world salvation, something positive.

These stories are powerful and formative myths of Judeo-Christian Western culture, even for those who don’t believe in them. Everyone subscribes to the narrative of social transformation—of being able to transform something bad to something good. This is, in fact, the true task of politics, and perhaps even more surprisingly, the true task of business. The original goal is simply to take the resources you have and transform it into something better. I would argue that this is the philosophical basis for the progress and the development that has happened in the Western Judeo-Christian world. It’s these values that have shaped Western culture. This call to transformation, then, is something incredibly powerful and can happen within a company, in politics, or in the personal sphere.

The second important teaching from Groen van Prinsterer makes is the call to witness, a phrase that does not mean people should say, “Hallelujah” everywhere they go, but rather that in every sphere of life, people glorify the creator. A proper understanding of politics can be derived from this concept. Politics is about promoting a development vision of society based on values. Promoting values, which is essentially glorifying the creator in every sphere of life, also translates into promoting social transformation.

Social transformation requires consistency and integrity. A person cannot promote values by which they do not live. For example, there was a president in Paraguay, Bishop Fernando Lugo, who had a very complicated life. He was a former Catholic bishop, he had children, and he was involved in

corruption. His personal life was convoluted, to say the least, but everyone said, “We don’t care what he does in his personal life. He’s promoting good values and promoting good policies.” Groen explains, however, that that’s not possible. A person simply can’t promote good values if they fail to live by them. This call to witness is much more than just repeating, “Hallelujah” ad nauseum. It’s about this walk of integrity and promoting values while also living by those values—leading by example.

### 3. C.S. Lewis

The last scholar to be discussed is C.S. Lewis, a man that is not particularly well known for being a political philosopher. Most people know of him as a literary scholar, a very famous fiction writer, and an outspoken Christian apologist. Nevertheless, he was a very interesting political philosopher but this part of his life remains mostly unspoken as a result of his hatred for party politics. Many people hate party politics, though, and that has bearing on how they conceptualize politics overall. But politics is so much more than just political parties and elections. It is, as aforementioned, about promoting a development vision of society based on values.

C.S. Lewis had many interesting things to say about politics, one of which was the importance of returning to natural law in order to justify morality. While many might disagree with this idea, it is important to discuss. He advocates for people to apply moral principles to politics and to avoiding the Bible to justify morality, explaining that, if nothing else, it’s a sounder debate strategy. To appeal to natural law is to appeal to a moral common ground, which allows for engagement with those that do not believe in the Bible. It means that people can reach a consensus on basic social issues by having employing honesty and reason. Additionally, while the Bible is the Word of God, it only reaffirms the laws of nature and the principles that already existed. Justifying morality based on natural law is essential to avoid being dogmatic. It provides the opportunity to genuinely reflect on why a certain policy is more desirable than another rather than just imposing biblical dogmas. People who impose dogmas, whether they take the form of ideologies or biblical dogmas, are dangerous, or at least are perceived as such. It is for these reasons that the Bible cannot and should not function as a political manual.

On the topic of being a good ruler, the second thing C.S. Lewis would point to is the importance of humility. It is important to recognize that social issues are complex and difficult to solve. It’s not easy to translate world law into public policy. The complexity of the task calls for thoughtful consideration, consultation with experts, and a great deal of research. Throughout the course of his work in political philosophy, C.S. Lewis continues to come back to the point that it is simply not enough to be a good person or to be a good Christian for that matter. Good intentions are not enough. Facilitating social change requires quality and excellence.

The third thing C.S. Lewis would point to is that of prudence. This is the other key word that he used when giving advice to politicians. It is important to be prudent because consequences matter. He warns very strongly against idealists of any kind on the basis that their tendency to take precipitated action makes them dangerous. That kind of behavior often leads to mistakes.

Referring back to the biblical narrative of creation, there is a strong message that man is sinful and has limited knowledge about the world around him. This makes it very difficult to address the complexity of the problems that need to be solved. At times, people are very easily blinded by selfishness or greed without even realizing it. At other times, they can be blinded by utopias, ideologies, or formulas, which is where another key point comes into play. Earthly perfection is unattainable. In the end, as Jesus said, the poor will always be with you.

Ideologies imply that if we simply change the structures and the institutions, then people will behave. For example, if there's a particular problem of crime in a neighborhood, some well-intentioned neighbors might think to set up an arts facility with the hope that people will go to the theater and no longer be involved in crime. This kind of thinking is idealistic, but that doesn't keep consultants from recommending those kinds of policies. It's not by creating some kind of institution that people are going to change. It's important to be pragmatic and realistic about the human condition, which is exactly where all the idealists and all the ideologies are wrong. In no way does this mean that creating institutions to help people behave in a better way is inherently bad, but salvation should not be the expected outcome.

The best advice, then, is to be humble, to work quietly, and to solve one problem at a time. Don't try to solve all the problems. A person that believes they can solve all the problems in the world is caught up in formulas and ideologies. It's important not to be deceived by people like that. It's also important to remember that consequences matter. Sometimes an attempt to solve a problem only leads to a new problem or exacerbates the original one. For example, environmentalists care about the environment and advocate for people to reduce the use of paper tissues because of the associated waste and pollution. Instead of people using paper tissues, they begin to use handkerchiefs made of cloth, only for the environmentalists to realize that handkerchiefs are actually worse for the environment because of the energy and chemicals required to wash them. Good intentions are not enough to counter the consequences.

C.S. Lewis underlines the importance of thinking, humility, prudence, and the use of scientific knowledge, but also makes clear that the moral decisions themselves cannot be left to the experts and the technocrats. It's crucial to consult the experts and gather all of the information and data necessary to make an informed decision, but the experts are not the ones to be making the decisions. In the end, these are not technical decisions, they're political decisions and they're moral decisions.

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