

THE QUIETUS OF POLITICAL INTEREST

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Quietists aim to bring something to rest, to its quietus—to move it from presence to absence, from activity to quiescence. Thus quietism is an indexical, its varieties established by the range of things whose quietus is sought. Most radical among quietists are those who seek the end of life *simpliciter*: they are necrophiles in the strict sense, and rare—startling when they occur. Melville’s *Bartleby* is their literary archetype: his “I would prefer not to” extends, by the end of that story, to all actions that sustain life; and so he dies, giving life itself its quietus. *Bartleby* has his Buddhist analogue in those who seek by meditation to enter the *nirodha-samapatti* and bring the stream of mental life to rest; or else an analogue in those who seek to bring the cool peace of death by blowing out the otherwise endlessly relit flame of *samsara*’s cycle of death and rebirth.

More common than these quietist virtuosos are those who seek to extinguish just one or another aspect of human life. There are Aristotelians who advocate extinguishing the very possibility of vice by developing habits of virtue that rule it out. There are Kantians who would quiet calculation about whether to perform particular immoralities—the lie, the rape—by unshakable adoption of the categorical imperative as their maxim. There are Christians who would prefer to expunge any interest in the results of the good works they advocate and per-

form by cultivating a *sancta indifferentia* of such dazzling obscurity that nothing else is visible.

This last, a quietism of particular consequentialist interests, comes itself in varieties. Most unpalatable to us, probably, is a quietist *ascesis* of interest in the consequences of what we advocate in the sphere of politics—the sphere, that is, of norms and laws governing the common life of a *polis*. This unpalatability is related to our willing membership in a post-Fordist democratic polity whose rhetoric amounts to advocacy of opinion about the consequences of writing or failing to write this or that proposal into law (or in some other way making or failing to make it the custom of the country). It is strange in such polities, willfully and almost incomprehensibly so, to appeal systematically to something other than consequence—to a proposal's *convenientia*, its appropriate beauty, say; or to its rooting in long-lived local tradition; or to its concordance with or entailment by God's explicit will; or to its principled rightness and, hence, to the corrupt wrongness of those competitors with which it is incompatible. Such justifications do occur, but when they do they seem to be illiberal outcroppings in a sea of free appeal to rationally assessable consequence. It is difficult to imagine the replacement of a sea, even by a continent of the same size. A continent of quietists—quietists with respect to interest in the outcome of what is advocated politically—would seem a desert to most of us, should we find ourselves abroad in it; and we should scarcely be able to recognize those at home in it as political agents. They would seem to us like cooks without interest in the taste of what they cook, or gardeners without interest in the color and scent of the bouquets that their labors might bring into being.

But what if the political world we inhabit is already more like a desert than a garden? Augustine claimed that the *saeculum*, which is approximately the sphere of the political, is a desert; and treating deserts as if they were gardens will not magically make them lush. It will moreover preclude cultivation of the flowers and fruits proper to deserts. If this analogy works—and I will be arguing, with only a few reservations, that it does—then it may be that political advocacy would be more fruitful if interest in its outcome were quieted rather than encouraged and nurtured, as it remorselessly is by us. If so, then a paradox looms: seeking good results cannot be the reason for quieting interest in the results of political advocacy. Good results, should they follow from this quietism, must be understood as epiphenomenal to it, rather than as the cause of or reason for adopting it.

Pascal is not ordinarily classified as a Quietist in Christian theological terms—those who were so classified in Spain and France in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were, typically, opposed profoundly to the Jansenists,

who thought of Pascal as one of their own—but he is among the few to have expounded a quietism of political interest in set terms. His most concentrated expression of the position is to be found in a short letter he wrote in 1657, probably to his brother-in-law Florin Périer. There Pascal offers a sketch of what political agency and judgment would look like if proposals and actions were made and undertaken without interest in their outcomes and if political agents were formed by a deep asceticism about political interest in this sense.

The letter begins by placing controversy and controversialists (*frondeurs*) in a theological context. You should, Pascal tells Périer, understand opposition to a proposal you favor as an opportunity “de souffrir quelque chose pour l’établissement” of what seems to you to be the truth of the matter, and you should welcome this opportunity instead of rejecting or muttering against it. For if God (or, as Pascal writes, “Providence”) has shown you the truth about a question under discussion, he is the same God “qui permet que des obstacles s’opposent à [votre] progrès.” To oppose those who place obstacles in the path that you prefer is implicitly to judge the barriers and those who place them as inspired by some other power. But there is no other power: there is only one God, who at the same time excites your support of a proposal and “donnât vigueur à ceux qui s’y opposent.” When you encounter opposition to a proposal that you favor, then you should treat that opposition with the calm that is “une des meilleures marques qu’on agit par l’esprit de Dieu.” To do otherwise—to oppose those who oppose your proposal with passionate irritation or anger—is to exhibit “l’esprit propre,” which is, in Pascal’s terms, the fundamental error of identifying yourself as the origin and cause of the truth of your judgments (if they *are* true). In which case, you usually come to think of them as transparently true, and of those who oppose them as opposing not only the transparent truth but also yourself as its propounder and guarantor.

Pascal follows this advocacy of tranquillity in politics with his usual skepticism about the ability of anyone, himself included, to discern his own rightness by introspection:

... pour bien reconnaître si c’est Dieu qui nous fait agir, il vaut bien mieux s’examiner par nos comportements au-dehors que par nos motifs au-dedans, puisque si nous n’examinons que le dedans, quoique nous n’y trouvions que du bien, nous ne pouvons pas nous assurer que ce bien vienne véritablement de Dieu. Mais, quand nous nous examinons au-dehors, c’est-à-dire quand nous considérons si nous souffrons les empêchements extérieurs avec patience, cela signifie qu’il y a une uniformité d’esprit entre le moteur qui inspire nos passions et celui qui permet les résistances à nos passions. . . .

The distinction here—between actions available to the external gaze and motives available to internal examination—is for Pascal a distinction between what can

be confidently known and what is mysterious. You can be fairly sure about what you do, your “*comportements au-dehors*,” but you are no reliable guide to your “*motifs au-dedans*.” If you want to know, then, whether your advocacy of some controversial proposal is motivated by God, you will do better to pay attention to the manner in which you suffer opposition to it than to the degree of certainty about its truth (or rightness) that you seem to yourself to have.

Given these assumptions, the purpose of advocacy or opposition is not to be victorious but rather to support, humbly and in tranquillity, proposals that seem to you to accord with God’s will (or to oppose, in the same spirit, those that do not). Victory-seeking—that “*désir . . . si naturel*”—does not sit well with the double skepticism that Pascal advocates: skepticism, that is, about whether what seems to you to be true is in fact so, coupled with skepticism about whether, in advocating what you advocate, you are God inspired or self-interested. What does sit well with this double skepticism is an advocacy that cannot be discouraged by the prospect of defeat and that is without concern about the results of victory. The defeat of the preferred proposal, should it be defeated, is itself permitted by God, a fact of which you can be much more certain than that the victory of the preferred proposal is what God wants. Moreover, the enactment of the preferred proposal is not the main point of advocating it: the point is, rather, to persist in advocacy of what seems true and/or right. Pascal does not, in this letter, explicitly address skepticism about our ability to know what the effects of victory will be. But such skepticism is entirely concordant with what he does advocate—to which, in a remarkable throwaway comment, he adds a third kind of skepticism: “*Je n’ai pu m’en empêcher, tant je suis en colère contre ceux qui veulent absolument que l’on croie la vérité lorsqu’ils la démontrent, ce que Jésus-Christ n’a pas fait en son humanité crée, c’est une moquerie.*” Pascal is here confessing his own subjection to the sort of advocate’s anger that he criticized earlier in his letter. What provokes this anger in him is the claim to transparent self-evidence in controversy. Pascal hates (the word is not too strong) those who demand instant assent to what they claim upon the basis of demonstration: “*que l’on croie la vérité lorsqu’ils la démontrent.*” The demand is a mockery; it is not what Jesus Christ did in advocating what he advocated, and it is not, according to Pascal, what we should do either. As is abundantly evident elsewhere in his work, what Pascal means is that Jesus Christ taught, performed miracles, died, and was resurrected, and that this complex pattern of action does not amount to an argumentative demonstration of the truth of any set of claims and does not convict those who reject it of blindness to what is self-evident. When it persuades (which is rarely), it moves those persuaded to that peculiar form of imitation that Christians call discipleship, and it does so by the transformative power of its presence. Though none of us is Jesus Christ, we each should, Pascal thinks, take the same line as he did when engaging in controversial advocacy.

There is in this point a deep skepticism about both the persuasive and the truth-conducting capacities of such argument as attempts demonstration. Such argument, whether about political or theological proposals, rarely persuades; and when it does persuade, it generally ought not to do so. It is not that argument is always unpersuasive or that it ought never to persuade. As is clear from distinctions drawn elsewhere in Pascal's work, he thinks that in the sphere of mathematics, for example, demonstrative arguments both can and should persuade, because the matters treated in that sphere are exactly those that reason is designed and equipped to treat. But in matters of theology beyond the elementary, and in politics beyond the extremely local, reason is not so equipped. If then, on Pascal's view, you become convinced that (for example) the pope can legitimately propound doctrine on matters of faith and morals but not on matters of textual exegesis, or that monarchy is preferable to republicanism, or that democratic polities are preferable to those ordered according to Islamic law, it will rarely and perhaps never be the case that you have arrived at your view as a result of being persuaded by argument. Even when you have been so persuaded, your conviction about the matter ought to be inconstant and shallow because, if you are clear-sighted, you will realize that, whatever the argument that brought you to this view, it is sufficiently complex, opaque, and subject to challenge that you cannot be sure you have ever understood it, that you understand it now, or that you will understand it in the future. You can always be more certain that your grasp of the arguments that brought you to conviction on matters of this degree of complexity is imperfect than you can be sure that the arguments are valid and their conclusions true.

Ordinarily, however, argument is not an instrument of any significance in bringing people to conviction about such matters, and so these considerations need not come into play. You believe what you believe about these things, ordinarily, on the twin grounds of authoritative testimony and the formatively persuasive power of the company you keep. Pascal does think, however, that argument ought to be persuasive about the nature and extent of its own limitations. What I have written in the last several paragraphs by way of commentary on and exposition of Pascal's letter is meant to provide an instance of such persuasion. There are good grounds, available and convincing to most, for judging that argument neither is nor should be convincing about matters of the appropriate degree of complexity (there can be reasonable disagreement about whether some particular matter reaches whatever the appropriate degree is), and, therefore, for judging that those committed to its sovereignty in such matters are thereby, and to the extent they do so, confused. Once the quietist ascetical renunciation of consequentialist, argument-imblicated political judgment has been made—a renunciation necessary only for those formed in a context where it is the usual thing, a context on Pascal's own horizon—becoming a *frondeur*; a controversial-

ist, requires fixation of belief on other grounds. For Pascal, the most important of these grounds was an act of intellectual submission to the authority of the tradition and institutions of Catholic Christianity (of course, under a particular interpretation). Quietists need not make just this act of submission, but they will have to make some such act.

Pascal's letter has two clear implications for controversialists, whether their controversies are political or not. The first is that they should engage in controversy with a level of energy and commitment appropriate to the importance of the topic and to the degree of certitude they have about the truth of their preferred position with respect to it. When the topic seems important to you, and you are deeply convinced that your position regarding it is the right one—and that, therefore, to the extent to which your opponents advocate a position incompatible with yours, they are wrong—then, other things being equal, you should engage in controversy with all the passion you can muster. Pascal's own practice in the *Lettres Provinciales* reflects this conclusion. When a topic seems to him of fundamental importance (such as the conditions under which Christians may or should inflict fatal violence on others, or the conditions under which they may or should lie to others), and when his Jesuit opponents take positions on these matters that seem to him fundamentally wrong, he opposes them with great vigor. The second implication of Pascal's letter is that advocates should have no concern for the outcome of their advocacy. That outcome, whatever it is—victory, defeat, victory with unanticipated bad effects, defeat with unanticipated good effects—neither prospectively motivates the controversialist's advocacy nor retrospectively calls it into question. Controversy, Pascal thinks, should be undertaken on altogether different grounds and for altogether different purposes.

Pascal's letter advocates a form of quietism applicable to advocacy in any sphere of human life; but it is a quietism only of judgment and expectation—*of interest*, to put the matter briefly; not one *of action*. For Pascal has no doubt that advocacy is proper in some circumstances and required in others, and he was perfectly prepared to advocate, with vehemence, positions that we would naturally call political. Pascal was no Bartleby.

Pascalian quietists of political interest may, however, be more or less radical. The most radical are those who seek to become political agents, which means (at least) advocates of political proposals, but in the entire absence of occurrent judgments about those proposals. Ideal-typical political agents of this radical sort advocate their proposals in much the same way that they ordinarily speak their mother tongue. That is, they have a habit that permits or requires the performance of certain skills under appropriate conditions, but they make judgments neither about what it is they do—about the texture of the skill's performance,

its rules and structure and boundaries and relations to other skills—nor about the point or purpose of performing the skill in question. And they are ascetical virtuosos of this absence. When an account of what they do, and of why (or for what) they do it, is demanded, they refuse to offer it; and when an account suggests itself to them, they discipline it toward absence. They seek a form of political agency in which there are no occurrent judgments about such matters and no disposition to form any. In the analogous case of speaking one's mother tongue, there is little need for such asceticism: most of us lack the knowledge, skill, and disposition to offer accounts of why we speak, of what speech is for, or of how to discriminate good speech-performances from bad ones—and these lacks neither inhibit our capacity to speak nor (usually) our sense of security in that capacity. Speech is, mostly, a reflexive habit; and speakers, with few exceptions, see no need to make it anything else. For radical Pascalian quietists, political advocacy and action can and ought to be like this too: like a gesture of courtesy or reverence or intimate greeting (the handshake, the genuflection, the kiss) that is transformed into something quite different—and worse—if its agents have occurrent or dispositional judgments about what it is they do and why they do it. Pascal writes sometimes of humans becoming machinelike, and sometimes of them becoming like beasts; and at those times, it is this kind of radical quietism of judgment that he has in mind.

Less radical are those whose *ascesis* of political judgment extends only to interest in consequence or outcome. For these moderate Pascalians, judgments about why a particular political proposal is to be advocated may be sought and nurtured so long as those judgments are not consequentialist, not based on probabilistic assessments of outcome. A political proposal may be advocated, for instance, as more beautiful than its competitors; or as more concordant with some understanding of what humans are, and are for; or as commanded by a source of unimpeachable authority. Pascalians of this sort are less thoroughgoing in their asceticism of judgment than the radical kind; but they share a principled rejection of interest in the outcome of what they advocate in the political sphere, and it is this quietism that interests me and that I think (with some reservations) is defensible. The warp of this political quietism is an asceticism—a progressive refusal—of properly political judgment. Where judgment, dispositional or occurrent, does occur without being refused, it is judgment of a different, nonpolitical sort. Its weft is a nurturing of habitual political action, with the radical removal of judgment, dispositional or occurrent, as the ideal-typical goal, approachable only asymptotically.

Political advocacy that is quietist with respect to interest requires of us a good deal of work. This is because prospective judgment as to the effects of writing some political proposal into law is for us ordinarily intimate with advocating or opposing that proposal; and so, ascetical effort is needed to refuse such judg-

ments and to nurture those of a different sort, or none at all, while remaining a political advocate. This difficulty is not natural: it is like neither the difficulties involved in refusing linguistic or physical intimacy with other human beings, nor like those connected with the refusal of food. There are virtuoso quietists of these kinds (the Christian desert ascetics, Kafka's hunger artist, the Buddha's ascetical teachers). They are practitioners of Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" in these spheres of human activity, but they have to refuse an appetite or a disposition proper to all human beings, or at least to all those not so damaged as to separate them from those appetites. The "we" to whom these difficulties apply is all, or almost all, human beings. But severing political action from interest in its outcome requires an ascetical effort of refusal only when the presence of this connection is the ordinary thing—as it is for us. Our political formation has been, for the last three centuries or so, democratic; and it is proper to that form of political life to nurture a strong connection between deliberation as to outcome and advocacy of political proposals. But nurturing this connection so that it seems obvious and inevitable is not proper to all forms of political culture.

Arguably (though I will not argue it), this connection is not proper to many premodern political forms; and it may not be proper to some contemporary ones. Perhaps, for instance, in a *polis* ordered by Islamic law, those who make a habit of connecting their advocacy of political proposals to prospective judgments about their effects would be as locally idiosyncratic as German tourists sunning themselves naked on Indian beaches. The locals keep their clothes on at the beach and look askance, with a mixture of disapproval and puzzlement, at tourists who remove them. But among us, everyone sunbathes naked, and the result is that clothing ourselves in a quietism of political interest requires effort. The resulting getup feels uncomfortable and looks odd to the locals. This sense of oddity is on its face no different from any other produced by transgressing local custom and knowledge. I think, however, that clothing ourselves in a quietism of political judgment, whether of the preliminary kind in which we eschew ordinary, consequentialist judgment, or of the more radical kind, in which we seek to become political agents altogether without judgments, has some advantages over local custom, which even the locals might be able to recognize and acknowledge. Nakedness, after all, can lead to epidermal carcinomas; and wearing clothes on the beach, odd though it may look to Europeans and some Americans, may be a cover-up with some good effects.

The first advantage of quietism of the kind I have described is that those who arrive at it are likely to have a more accurate understanding of the limits of our capacity to make accurate prospective judgments about the results of enacting this or that political proposal than do those of us whose thinking hews to the ordinary consequentialist line. These limits are especially obvious, almost unarguably so, when the proposal under discussion advocates adjustment of a complex

system. Adjusting such a system in one respect always has unanticipated and often undesired effects upon other aspects of that system's behavior. This is true in economics, both micro- and macro-: no one appears able to predict the results of legislation (or the weather) upon the workings of financial markets, even though the rewards for successfully doing so are vast. It is true, as well, in ecological matters, even of a quite local kind: the introduction of wild parakeets into the ecosystem of Chicago forty years ago has had effects (upon local bird, tree, and human life) whose particulars were quite unanticipated. And it is true in matters of foreign policy: one country's or international agency's intervention in the internal affairs of another, whether militarily, diplomatically, or economically, always produces unanticipated ripples and blowbacks. Ordinary consequentialist discussion about the likely results of realizing one political proposal or another is blind to this incapacity: it is very rare to hear mention of it in campaigns for elected office or in floor debates, because the grammar of political talk in democracies requires that it be occluded. If we were to acknowledge that we sometimes or often or usually have no way to assess the outcomes of the proposals we advocate, then we, as good deliberative democrats, would have to give up an essential element of our political self-understanding. Hence those committed to democracy as the preferred form of political culture will ordinarily avoid looking at this incapacity; and if they do look at it, they do so glancingly, dismissing it as an unwarrantedly excessive skepticism or a cloak for some form of totalitarianism.

It is not so difficult, however, to see that skepticism in this area is, in general, more accurate than epistemic optimism. It is not that skepticism about our capacity to predict the results of political proposals is always right; a more precise formulation is that the more complex the system to which a particular proposal advocates adjustment, the more likely that skeptical disavowal is the right response to claims to know the results of the proposed adjustment. If, for example, a proposal is made to adjust a system as simple as the traffic pattern in a small town—perhaps by shifting the town's only stop sign from one intersection to the next—the chances of accurately predicting outcomes are not bad. But if a proposal is addressed to a system even slightly more complex—for example, to change the red-light time from 20 to 25 seconds on all the stoplights along a major commercial artery in a city—then matters become much more difficult. Drivers may become frustrated and may in significant numbers abandon that route for others, which in turn may lead to the closure of businesses along the route, an increase in bankruptcy rates, and rises in the rate of commercial rents along other, now more heavily traveled, routes. When proposals are addressed to systems at a national or international level (and it is now difficult to make political proposals at a national level that do not have significant connections with and effects upon international systems), the number of variables in play increases exponentially, and the chance of successful prediction correspondingly decreases.

The simple and the local are intimate with each other, just as the complex and the cosmopolitan are, and that is why democracy's preference for making and defending political proposals according to judgments about their outcomes makes more sense at the local level than it does at the national or international. The town's selectmen, the village's parish council, even, perhaps, the city council—these are venues in which deliberative democracy's penchant for thinking about the outcomes of political proposals is not sunk hopelessly in self-deception. But with respect to systems of greater complexity, the honest thing to say is that skepticism about assessment of outcomes ought to be the default position because it is usually the correct one, and that therefore deliberative democracy cannot work in the way that its advocates portray it as working (which is not the same as to say that it cannot work at all).

Quietists of political interest have a distinct advantage here. It is easier for them to see that thinking in consequentialist terms about political proposals that are aimed at the adjustment of complex systems will usually be unsuccessful and that those who advocate doing so are confused (or are being deceptive). Those committed, unskeptically, to deliberative democracy in its ordinary forms are apt to avert their gaze. But clarity—which is to say, skepticism—about political prediction is not the only advantage of quietisms of political interest. Another advantage is that quietists are not discouraged by, or in any deep way concerned about, claims that the political proposals they advocate will have effects they do not want. Suppose, for example, that you advocate adjustment of the tax code toward the removal of tax relief on mortgage interest. An objection to enacting this proposal might be that it would discourage home ownership, which in turn would have deleterious effects upon the stability and order of residential communities, which in turn would threaten a range of civic virtues. An argument in support of the proposal might be that, by removing this particular subsidy for the middle class, more funds could be made available for the poor, which in turn might permit support of educational programs that would foster stability and order in towns and cities, which in turn would nurture a range of civic virtues. Quietist advocates of the proposal are neither discouraged by the opposing argument nor encouraged by the supporting one. Because the grounds upon which they advocate the proposal are divorced from consideration of its effects, these kinds of encouragement and discouragement are in principle irrelevant, and this separation yields a steadiness of advocacy not easily available to those who support the same proposal on deliberatively consequentialist grounds.

A third advantage, close kin to the second, is that, while consequentialist advocates are likely to be discouraged when it appears their proposal cannot be enacted, and as a result advocate an associated proposal that they take to have a greater chance of enactment, their quietist counterparts are less likely to engage in substitution. Eschewing consequentialist judgments about a proposal is easily

extended to eschewing judgments about the likelihood of its enactment. If that move is made, the argument that there are not enough votes for a proposal, or that there are other reasons that it cannot be enacted, will have no purchase, however true these claims may seem to be. Since quietists do not advocate proposals on these grounds, they are not troubled by such arguments. As with the second advantage of political quietism, there is a skeptical and a nonskeptical form of this repudiation. In the skeptical form, quietists refuse to take account of arguments about the likelihood of enactment, since they think that such judgments have a low probability of being true. In the nonskeptical form, quietists refuse because they do not care whether such judgments are true or not. Skepticism in this area is less attractive than in the area of judgment about the effects of enactment, because the systems that govern passage or denial of a political proposal are many orders of magnitude less complex than the systems that those proposals attempt to adjust. You stand a much better chance of predicting outcomes on the floor of the U.S. Senate than you do predicting outcomes of adjusting interest rates or ecosystems. Hence the affinity of quietism to skepticism in this area is less clearly an advantage, but it is still advantageous as compared with the confident assertiveness of consequentialism.

Quietism of political interest, if coupled with support of political proposals on grounds other than interest, thus permits continued advocacy in the face of both consequentialist and utopian objections. This sort of advocacy may be activist (barricades, protests, martyrdoms) or verbal (broadsheets, blogs, street-corner speeches). It may occur within ordinary legal bounds (voting, running for office, lobbying) or beyond them (civil disobedience, treason, fomenting revolution). In all its variants, quietistic advocacy is impatient with or indifferent to ordinary political deliberation. And it is often, though not inevitably, skeptical about the likelihood that predictive judgments concerning the effects of political proposals will yield truths.

There is a fourth and final advantage that quietists of political interest have over their deliberately consequentialist opponents: pretense can be abandoned, and consistency more easily embraced. For the ordinary post-Fordist, democracy-advocating, consequentialist politician (whether running for office or voting), an absence of political interest must be occluded or criticized when it surfaces. Almost never can it be encouraged or enabled. A candidate for elective office cannot say that she has no idea what the results of writing her programs into law will be, even if this is true and she knows it to be true. Neither, usually, can she say that she advocates what she does for reasons (and causes) that have nothing to do with the likely results of her proposals becoming law. (The exceptions here are the occasional appeals to unadulterated principle—results be damned—that still survive in our politics.) Rather, she must say that she advocates what she does because of the good it will do and because she knows that it will bring *just that*

good about and carry no evils in its train. But the truth is almost always otherwise. Voters rarely vote because they are convinced of—or have thought much about—the matters I have been discussing; instead, they vote because they like one thing or another about features of the campaigning politician (sex, race, hair color, tone of voice, manner of speech), or else because it is a matter of custom for them and the people with whom they identify to vote for a candidate who speaks in these ways, advocating proposals of these kinds. Voters, that is, are closet quietists of political interest in any case—and the same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for those who seek office. But they remain, by and large, in the closet because the public rhetoric of our polities requires it of them. And closets, when you have lived in them long enough, begin to feel spacious, comfortable, and above all natural: a proper home. In the same way, lies can start to feel like truths. Pascalian quietists of political interest, by contrast, need no closet and no lies: they can speak and act as they are. And this is a profound advantage.

The most radical and thoroughgoing quietisms of political judgment are theological. They may be so in the strict sense that they are informed by understandings of the implications of God's nature and his demand for political advocacy and action. Or they may be theological in the *ersatz* sense that their advocacy of political proposals is derived from an understanding of humanity that transcends the political. I have already touched on Pascal's theological quietism. I would like to conclude now by commending a political quietism of interest that is fully Christian, in the spirit of Pascal. It consists of three theses:

(1) Christian advocacy of a political proposal assumes that justice in the political sphere is not attainable but must nonetheless be sought.

(2) Christian advocacy of a political proposal assumes that, while Christian advocates can act unjustly, they cannot themselves suffer injustice.

(3) Christian advocacy of a political proposal proceeds always without concern for outcomes.

These theses are normative in the sense that they encapsulate a *particular* (by which, I mean *controversial among Christians*) understanding of the well-formed Christian political agent. My three theses do not imply that every self-described Christian political agent is like the one they conjure. In commenting on the three, I will attempt, by radicalizing them, to make their structure and telos as clearly evident as possible.

These theses may be read to assume that the political order, the order of common life constrained by positive law, is fundamentally the sphere of custom or of convention backed by force. If so, then the political order does not belong to the order of reason, which in turn means that local laws, whatever they are, cannot be justified rationally with sufficient translucent radiance to convince all

comers that some particular law or ensemble of laws is just. That notion is compatible with the claim that some laws *are* just and others are *not*: we are simply not in a position to tell the difference with certitude, and attempting to support the local laws by argument—to root them in something beyond custom backed by force—has inevitably the result of making clear that reasoned argument in this sphere cannot do what its advocates and users claim. Reason can do nothing here other than recognize and make public acknowledgment of its own limits. Obeying the laws, whatever they are, is *comme la mode*, a matter of fashion and custom, and this notion comports well with the understanding of *law* to mean “that which you will be punished for disobeying.” A peaceful or harmonious city, on this view, is one in which the laws are obeyed by all—or at least most—without argument about their justice. The net effect of argument about the laws’ justice or reasonableness is to make it less likely that they will be obeyed as a matter of consensus. The laws, in this respect, are like the norms of local etiquette: as soon as you begin arguing about whether it is better—more just, more proper, more pleasing, more elegant—to shake hands or to bow upon meeting someone new, etiquette has already lost its defining characteristic, which is to be acted upon unreflectively as a matter of local habit. In Pascal’s words, to argue about etiquette or political justice is “un jeu sûr pour tout perdre,” from which it follows that success in effecting political change is not in reason’s gift. Such changes are brought about by force or by insensibly gradual changes in the custom of a place. The only contribution that reason can make when it enters the political order is to sow doubt where there was certainty, and discord where there was harmony. Reason cannot discern, much less effect, material justice in the order of politics.

This view of the relations between reason and the political sphere illuminates thesis (1). This thesis does not hold that justice is unattainable in the political order; it holds that when Christians act in the political order they do so on the assumption that justice cannot be attained. That is, Christians regulate their political advocacy by this assumption, being careful to note that an acknowledged incapacity to discern what is just neither requires nor supports the nihilistic claim that there is no justice. Regulative judgments of the sort contained in thesis (1) operate epistemically and pragmatically, not metaphysically: they provide first-order rules for conduct and attitude toward conduct, rather than claims about the way things are.

The second thesis, which is that Christian political advocacy is (or should be) informed by the assumption that Christians cannot suffer injustice but can act unjustly, is of the same logical kind as the first thesis. Neither is a claim of a properly descriptive sort. Thesis (2) does not mean that the difference between Christians and everyone else is that members of the former group cannot suffer injustice while members of the latter can. It is, rather, a regulative assumption of the same formal sort as thesis (1): it tells Christians how to behave and how to reg-

ulate their behavior. St. Paul claimed he was the foremost among sinners, though he had not tabulated and enumerated all the sins of all those who had ever lived, compared his to theirs, and then decided his were the worst. Rather, Paul's claim means that, in considering his own sins and those of others, he assumes, and therefore behaves as if he believed, that he is the foremost among sinners—that his own sins are of a different kind and gravity from those of anyone else. Thesis (2) is a claim of this kind. It has two principal functions. The first is to prescribe for Christians a skeptical attitude toward the merits of their own political judgments. They cannot know whether they are right (recall the working assumption in thesis [1])—and even if they are right, they cannot assess the likely effects of the success of any political proposal that they advocate. What they can be sure of is that they are, in any particular case, more or less self-interested, confused, and corrupt; and they can also be sure that God permits the state of political affairs that they oppose. These judgments encourage humility and its correlate, which is a refusal to divide the world into forces of good and forces of evil. There are, on this view of the political order, only ignorant armies clashing by night; and the most dangerous are those whose troops are convinced of their own unimpeachable rightness and the concomitant wrongness of their opponents. Thus, the second principal function of thesis (2) is to encourage Christians in a calm, even-minded attitude toward political opponents, an equanimity that obtains *soit que la vérité soit connue, soit qu'elle soit combattue*. Thesis (2) holds that Christians should take themselves to be wrong before they take themselves to be mistreated, and it implies too that those who disagree with Christians are not fundamentally alien to them.

It might seem that theses (1) and (2), taken together, lead immediately to a radical and throughgoing quietism of political action, as well as a quietism of properly political judgment. If they did, a result would be that the proper response to the local laws, whatever they are, would be only to obey them and never try to change them. But the first two theses need not be so read; and to see why not, they must be brought together with the third, which is that Christians advocating a political proposal do so without concern for the outcome of their advocacy. This thesis, like the first two, governs both political behavior and the agent's understanding of it. Thesis (3) specifies what you may hope for when you act politically. If, as thesis (1) claims, you cannot know whether justice has been attained in the political order and you should act as if that were so—and if, as thesis (2) claims, you can be more certain that you are wrong than you can that you are being mistreated—then it should be clear why you should not be concerned about the outcome of your political advocacy. You cannot know what the outcome will be, you cannot know whether it is the right outcome, and you cannot know the extent to which you are motivated in your advocacy by damnable desires (I use the strong word deliberately). Since all of these matters are opaque

to you when acting politically, you cannot reasonably do so out of deep concerns regarding the outcome. To so act would be to imagine that opacity is transparent. Better, on a Pascalian view, is to act because it seems to you, under the constraints specified by the first two theses, right to act.

I, for example, am persuaded that the U.S. government should mandate a minimum wage sufficient to support a family above the poverty line if just one member of the family works full-time (this would mean a minimum wage of something like \$15 per hour at 2008 prices). Among others, Catholics (of whom I am one) have good magisterial reason to support such a political program: it was advocated, for example, in Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Rerum novarum* (1891), then again in John Paul II's *Centesimus annus* (1991). Its heavy doctrinal weight is among the principal causes of my advocacy of this political proposal: I judge it right as a Catholic to show (at least) *obsequium religiosum* to the teachings of the church on this as on other matters, and here is an instance of the intellectual submission implied by most forms of quietism. A form of it is implied also in Pascal's letter to Périer. My advocacy of this particular proposal does not imply that I believe a new minimum-wage bill stands a chance in Congress; but I do think, under the constraints expressed in theses (1) and (2), that the proposal in question is right, which is to say that it is more adequately expressive of what God intends for the human social order than its principal competitors are. Still, I have no opinion about whether it can be or is likely to be written into positive law. Moreover, and much more importantly, I advocate this proposal not principally because I think its results will be good—about that, I have no opinion either—but rather because the act of advocacy itself is an appropriate response to a particular, in this case theological, understanding of the social order and the human good. Political advocacy, so understood, replicates in its structure the fundamental Christian response to the world, which is that of receiving it as a sacrament and, in consequence, suffering it in gratitude and lament, properly mixed.

Christians do not (or ought not) suffer the sacraments of baptism and eucharist because they think doing so has good effects on them, or because they think the world is transformed by sacraments, or because they think that baptized people are better than the unwashed. Rather, Christians suffer the sacraments because these are gifts to which the appropriate response is gratitude for their givenness, along with lament for the inadequacy of that gratitude. In a manner that illuminates and instantiates theses (1) and (2), Christians thus participate in the God they take to be the giver of sacraments. The principal point of participation in the sacraments is the act of participation itself. Analogously, the principal point of political advocacy is the act of advocacy itself.

Thesis (3) replicates in its structure another fundamental feature of the Christian life. If your political advocacy cannot be discouraged by external circumstance, and especially not by calculations about the likelihood of success,

or the probable effects of success (should it occur), then you will not give up advocacy when it seems likely the results will be bad. Woven centrally into this tapestry of thought is the figure of the martyr. The Christian martyrs would not accept the deaths given to them if they were acting in the world out of concern for the outcome of their acts. The three theses under discussion, then, are not only *not* quietist with respect to political action, but they make *every other* justification for political advocacy look as if *it were*.

This Christian-theological intensification of the quietism of political judgment renders the city—the sphere of politics—habitable by and strangely hospitable to those conformed to the bloody figure of Christ on the cross. That figure is opaque to Christians for many reasons, among them that upon it the opacity of the blood-saturated political order was violently concentrated, and that by it the political order of custom backed by force was redeemed, having been shown for what it is. Christian political agents cannot, according to their own self-understanding, do what Christ did. But they can, again according to their own self-understanding, imitate Christ by refusing, as he did, to imagine that they can establish justice on earth prior to the *eschaton*, that they can be treated unjustly, or that their political action requires concern about its outcome.

The quietism of political judgment—or rather, the Christian-theological version that I have sketched, with Pascal and Augustine as its patron saints—is one I entertain with a seriousness approaching endorsement. The point of sketching it here is not, however, to argue for its truth or rightness but to use it as an illustrative instance of how such quietisms ordinarily work. They typically require an extrapolitical fulcrum coupled with a high degree of skepticism about the prospective capacities of reason in the political sphere; and they typically issue in a political advocacy beyond discouragement or encouragement by properly political argument. The particular flavor of the Christian (Augustinian-Pascalian) instance is provided by its particular way of construing the world as a gift, given by a triune God and damaged by human sin. Those particulars will not inform every quietism of this sort, of course; and since they are unlikely to prove either comprehensible or attractive to most of those not already formed by them, a depiction of them like the one given here will not make many converts. It remains the case, however, that at least as far as the West is concerned, the only quietism of political judgment to have had a significant presence and influence has been this Christian-theological version.