



Leonine Institute
for
Catholic Social Teaching

Nil Desperandum - How Doubt Works Against Catholic Social Teaching

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Modern and post-modern philosophers are distinguished by their radical doubt, their insistence that the only real things are that which can be absolutely known. Descartes first introduced this sense of doubt in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. He declares that he is no longer going to trust any knowledge that he gains through his senses, because his senses often mislead him, nor will he trust knowledge previously obtained, since that is all hearsay that he has taken on faith¹. In other words, Descartes will doubt everything, and take nothing on faith. Only that which he knows he cannot doubt is that which he will base he will base his knowledge.

Descartes regards doubt as the foundation of knowledge. Descartes devises a “Method of Science” comprised of four precepts. The first of which is: “...never to accept anything for true which I did not clearly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice, and to comprise nothing more in my judgment than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly as to exclude all ground of doubt.”²

Close on Descartes’ heels is John Locke, David Hume and Immanuel Kant all of whom developed this idea further. Locke is a champion of empiricism, Hume reestablished human nature to experience and

¹ Descartes, Rene. “Meditations on First Philosophy” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1996. yale.learningu.org

² Descartes, Rene. “Discourse on The Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences.” Early Modern Texts, 2007. Early Modern Texts.



materialism, and Kant denied all knowledge that was not “synthetic a priori” or, in another sense, mathematical. In short, between the 17th and the 19th centuries, the West turned on its heels. It went from trusting what was reasonable, considering theology and metaphysics, to accepting only what was sensible, rejecting all else. And sometimes even rejecting that.³

How Doubt Grew

Most people, however, are not philosophers, nor have they heard of these names before, so what does this have to do with the average person? Does a group of dead thinkers who were concerned that they might not even be real have any bearing on us reasonable people today? Of course. Nothing happens inside of a vacuum and it would be a mistake to think that we remain unaffected by their methods of radical doubt. Think of how, in grade school, most are taught the six (or seven) step scientific method in their science class; something like: ask a question, form a hypothesis, conduct an experiment, analyze data, report the result. This is certainly legitimate but instils a dependence on tangible knowledge. It both teaches that if it cannot be measured then it cannot be known, and it is not known until it is measured. Until it can be measured, doubt it.

³ Hume, for example, taught that one could not prove causality, no matter how many times the cause and effect was witnessed.



Perhaps that is a stretch and I am being too hard on grade school science class. Consider, then, the American Democracy.⁴ The beauty of Democracy is that it is a system of checks and balances to ensure that every citizen is at total liberty. This is all well and good, yet it sows in the American psyche several detrimental questions: balance of what? Checks for whom? We look around and, since we can neither perceive nor measure any innate goodness in people that would keep them from being tyrants, we *must* have a system that protects us from tyranny. The whole Democratic System (oddly enough, inspired by the writings of John Locke) is based around doubt, and that doubt still perpetuates it. We doubt that men will be good, true, or virtuous without some sort of fear or incentive simply because there is no tangible reason as to why they ought to be. Unfortunately, greed, tyranny, and malice are easy enough to perceive for, as surely as things exist, there are people who will want them. Therefore, to protect the nation from Hobbesian chaos, faith is put in a political system as it is put in a scientific one and radical doubt informs each life of each citizen.

So, yes, the philosophical thought of yesteryear's thinkers play a profound role in everyone's lives. The question now is: how long until that

⁴ Yes, America is a Democratic Republic which is, nevertheless, a form of democracy. I will not contend with semantics further than this.



doubt becomes despair? The shift from doubt to despair may seem drastic, yet it is wholly natural. Consider how long can a child doubt that her father loves her before she simply begins not to believe in it? How long can a spouse doubt another's fidelity without finally knowing that she is not faithful? How can a populace continually doubt one another and still claim to have national integrity? If a person doubts his safety in a cage with a lion, will he not panic and scramble for freedom? Doubt breaks down relationships and instils despair. What one doubts, he will ultimately reject.

Philosophers have been a lens through which we have seen our current plight, so reflect on a philosopher yet again. Friedrich Nietzsche was a German Philosopher who lived in the latter half of the 19th century. He famously wrote that "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." This passage is often quoted as if it is the triumph of secularism over traditional theology, yet-while Nietzsche was an atheist and a skeptic- the rest of that quoted work is one of despair. Nietzsche knew that if we stopped believing in God (and, consequently, metaphysics at large) we would see the whole breakdown of society. His work, The Madman found in *The Gay Science*, warns people that what they are living is a sham. All customs, rules, laws, knowledge, it is nothing but the remnants of what was once founded on God, but - since no one believes in the precepts which founded that



order - those remnants were soon to collapse as well. Nietzsche's claim was not of boastful impiety, it was a despairing warning⁵.

A similar despair now grips contemporary culture at large and this is the largest detriment to Catholic Social Teaching. The Catholic Social Teaching that the Church has officially proposed (through *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Humanae Vitae*) and unofficially (by Her sons, Chesterton and Belloc) remain lofty ideals. They are greeted with the disciple's frustration, "This is a difficult teaching. Who can accept it?"⁶

Overview of Distributism

To avoid ambiguity, look at a singular application of Catholic Social teaching: Distributism. Distributism is the socioeconomic ideology championed and coined by G.K. Chesterton and Hillarie Belloc in the early 20th century. The church has never officially used the word in any of Her teaching, but "distributist" ideals are specifically grounded in Catholic Social teaching, most particularly subsidiarity⁷. Plainly, it is where the rubber meets the road.

⁵Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science* Tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1974) 181-182

⁶ John 6:60

⁷ Pope Leo XIII "Rerum Novarum." Vatican: the Holy Sea. Vatican Website. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1891. Web.



Distributism is largely considered an economic idea, but any distributist would say that it is more than that; to the distributist, distributism is the interaction of a healthy and fulfilled culture. It is the collection of policies, laws, practices, traditions, and customs that facilitate integral human fulfillment. It perpetuates subsidiarity in all things. Subsidiarity is the practice that all that can be achieved at the lowest possible level, ought to be achieved there. This means that first and foremost, the family ought to be the bases for all society. All problems, education, and development that the family can provide it has an obligation to provide. What the family cannot provide, it is within the responsibility of the extended family. Then to the town, then to the state and so on. Therefore, distributist ideas transcend economic ones, but deal with familial interactions, education, sociology and others.

However, it is extremely easy (and important) to consider subsidiarity on an economic level so that is where Distributism gets its reputation for being an economic theory. Distributism teaches that businesses should be privately owned and as small as possible. In fact, what is distributed is not the wealth, but *the land*. It is not that all businesses should be small, but they *are* small because they are a part of the privately-owned property of a family. In a Distributist utopia, chain companies and large corporations would be unthinkable. The reasons are thus; first, products are simply



better when they are made by artisans rather than machines. When a business is small, the producer and the consumer are necessarily interacting, and the product will be more exact to what is desired.⁸

Second, distributists know that people are made with talents and abilities (this is where the ideal transcends economics and considers philosophy and psychology) and that they are most fulfilled when they have an opportunity to use those talents. This opportunity is given in a market where the businesses are small and many in a way that it is not given to clerks in department stores. Small businesses foster pride and ownership in work, a chance to learn a trade and flourish, and create meaningful relationships based upon participation in a local community.

Third, small markets discourage waste. A small business can neither afford to be wasteful nor can even overlook how they are being wasteful. A small kitchen (particularly a household) can not afford to be wasteful with food and will be more aware of the waste they produce. The remnants of a meal will go toward a soup or salad or perhaps a new recipe all together. If they so choose, they can compost their debris and start a garden to both cut cost and enter a niche, organic market. They have the freedom of material that is not afforded a large company; a restaurant, a cafeteria, or an

⁸ Chesterton, G.K., *The Outline of Sanity* (New York: Mead & Company, 1927)
<http://www.gkc.org.uk/>



institution. The larger companies are bound by overwhelming demand, name brand image, and the constant necessity for products quickly that they just “cut their losses.”^{9 10}

Upon reading this, one might think that this sounds like Capitalism. It certainly does. Distributist Economics is wholly unique from any other form of economics, but it is largely considered the “third way” both because it is the third economic option and because it contains elements of Capitalism and Socialism. In fact, Chesterton said, “A distributist has to spend half of his time explaining to a socialist why he is not a capitalist and the other half explaining to a capitalist why he is not a socialist.”

Considering Capitalism

Therefore, compare distributism to each and see the difference. This is no easy task, since our understanding of any ideology is always on a spectrum, therefore grounding them in a fundamental definition is always a point of contention. Capitalism, for instance, takes on a new meaning for almost every capitalist. Is Capitalism a totally free market? What are the

⁹ Chris Vogliano and Katie Brown. *The State of American Waste and Opportunities to Make a Difference* (Cleveland: The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics), 7-11

¹⁰ The cited source claims that 44% of food is wasted at a household level, which is true. This, however, is skewed by the number of households in the United States versus the number of restaurants and other institutions of which there are fewer. If one were to compare the number of households (as recorded by the census bureau) to the number of restaurants (as recorded by the National Restaurant Association) and look at how much food is wasted by the pound, a household only wastes a tenth of the food.



restrictions? Who restricts? Nevertheless, Eamonn Butler, after addressing the difficulty with a definition, proposes one of broad strokes in *An Introduction to Capitalism*. He writes, “How then to define capitalism? At heart, it is a general way of economic life in which people create and apply capital goods in order to produce, as productively as possible, the goods and services that other people want.”¹¹

This sounds well and good, but there are two subliminal implications with the definition. The first is that it relies upon the competition of “people” (i.e. everyone) and second there is no end. Verily, in reference to the former, Butler is clear in previous pages that competition is not something that is wholly unique to Capitalism,¹² which is true. Distributism has a competitive element as well. The difference is that Capitalism almost entirely *depends* upon competition. He later writes, “Another thing that makes capitalism so dynamic is competition. To stay ahead of the competition, and stop their customers defecting to others, producers must constantly innovate and improve what they offer and how they produce it.”

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¹¹ Butler, Eamonn. *An Introduction to Capitalism* (London, The Institute for Economic Affairs: 2018), 14.

¹² *Ibid*, 12

¹³ *Ibid*, 54



If, however, the goal is winning against other businesses for a sale, then the focus shifts from the relationship between buyer and seller to the value and utility of the product. And by what means is competition to be won? Is it not simply going to be by cutting corners, exploiting workers, and manipulating the buyers with obscene advertising? Innovation may be a benefit, but manipulation is certainly much easier.

Furthermore, in reference to the latter problem, if businesses “create and apply capital goods *in order* to produce” then there is not an end to production. The businessman is consumed with a perverse sense of *excelsior!* no matter how well his business might do. The only option in a capitalistic economy for profits is to reinvest the profits back into the company to grow. Fundamentally, this is a system that, therefore, rewards greed because it is a desire for profit that perpetuates the system. On a deeper level, if a business is incited by the very system in which it stands to grow and understandably does so, there are consequent misfortunes that could have otherwise been avoided had the business been kept small. Such as the minimization of waste and a preservation of the buyer-seller relationship; two things which are fundamental for a humane market. In short, the problem with Capitalism is that it puts products before people.



Distributism's answer to the first problem comes not only through small businesses (though that is an important part and the easiest to discuss) but through a general shift in the community at large. The competition in distributism is not with other businesses, but with the needs and desires of the community and with oneself. There ought to be more done to foster family and community. Churches should be the hub of fellowship, townships should take their festivals seriously, states should do what they can to foster the growth of families. When community is grown by communication, the market is perpetuated by genuine innovation based upon needs and wants; not novelty and competition.

Granted, a distributist knows that the businesses must remain small for the market to be *humane*. When the business is kept small, the concern of the business owner is making the product better than he made it the last time, both to ensure that he and his family are fed and because that is in his nature. If there is competition, it is against himself, not his fellow man. On the whole, this is better for the psyche. People are meant to improve their *techne*, but that will happen naturally, as it has throughout history.

Capitalistic competition adds needless stress to production and there is nothing in the mind that can truly fathom on-going competition, we have



nothing like it in the world. Everything else has a natural end, and no competition naturally involves such stakes as life or death.

Regarding the endless nature of the competition, the idea is that if the focus shifts to community rather than business in a society, then business will only grow as far as it is necessary and beneficial for that community. However, there is an understanding that restrictions are needed to thwart out-and-out competition. Though he was a self-professed capitalist, Frank T. Carlton, wrote like a Distributist when he wrote,

Unregulated, cut-throat, or jungle competition may lead to results which even the optimistic deem undesirable. The wolf, the rattlesnake, the skunk, sagebrush, and the cactus are the products of long-continued and fierce struggle for existence; these unlovely plants and animals are the results of fierce or excessive competition. The patient cow, the trotting horse, the dog, wheat, and the Concord grape are the products of controlled or regulated competition. They are the results of "artificial" rather than "natural" conditions. In the industrial and business world, cut-throat competition leads to the sweatshop, to below-cost-of-living wages, to a long working day, and to wage earning by children. Competition within certain limits may lead to initiative and efficiency; but unrestrained competition is a distinct evil.¹⁴

Carlton is expressing the madness and ugliness that results from unregulated competition. He further argues that no one really wants unrestricted competition. "In recent generations 'free' competition does not mean absolutely unlimited competition; it means fair or desirable

¹⁴ Carlton, Frank T. "Capitalism and Competition" *American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Inc.* Vol 8, No. 3 (Apr., 1949), 253.



competition. Free competition signifies competition within reasonable limits; it means the observance of ordinary but changing standards of honesty and of decency.”¹⁵ This is a basic tenet of distributism. The community ought to dictate the market.

Scrutinizing Socialism

How reliable are “standards of honesty and decency?” A Distributist and a Catholic would argue that these standards are very reliable, for the most part. Nevertheless, the world is a fallen one and, though people are inclined for the good, laws are obviously needed. If laws are needed to govern a society, to ensure honesty and decency, so too they are needed in the market.

Therefore, Distributists often are accused of being Socialists because they believe that the means of production should be distributed and that the State has power to regulate the market (to certain ends). Chesterton has even alluded that, in the event that a “big business” is necessary, it should be a co-operation in which every worker has a share, which is a socialist idea.

Socialism is similar, but it is difficult to define since socialists disagree with themselves. In broad strokes, socialism is a society in which “the bulk

¹⁵ Ibid, 254.



of the means of production is under social, democratic control¹⁶.” This takes many shapes (including that corporations are little democracies themselves in which every employee has a say), but the most popular understanding is that the means of production is owned by the government and products are sold in competitive markets¹⁷. Ultimately, it is six of one or half a dozen of the other. Socialism is based upon democracy¹⁸ and if the means of the production is owned by the government, and - in a democracy - the government is owned by the people, then ipso facto the means of production is owned by all. No matter how the eggs are cracked, the appeal of socialism is that it eliminates private property which will (theoretically) thwart the amassment of wealth.

The difference is, that, while the state is involved in a distributist society, private property is ultimately maintained as the basic tenet. The state is meant to ensure that every person has all the freedom that comes with property, which is distinct from the government providing universal *work*. It was Pope Leo the XIII who wrote in *Rerum Novarum*, “Socialists, therefore, by endeavoring to transfer the possessions of individuals to the community at large, strike at the interests of every wage-earner, since they

¹⁶ “Socialism” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. July 15, 2019.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/socialism/>

¹⁷ Shleifer, Andrei and Vishny, Robert W. “The Politics of Market Socialism” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives Vol. 8 No. 2* (American Economic Association: Spring 1994),165.

¹⁸ Lichtheim, George. *A Short History of Socialism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1970) 3-10.



would deprive him of the liberty of disposing of his wages, and thereby of all hope and possibility of increasing his resources and of bettering his condition in life.”¹⁹

In a distributist society, the State has the power to limit the property owned by a person so that his business remains *his* business. Yet the difference between this and socialism is that the property remains private. For instance, the state has the right to dictate that there is enough land in a township for a certain family to have five acres. On the five acres, the family is free to raise bees, or cows, or potatoes. Whatever they raise is theirs, and, if they wish to expand, they will be bound, not by the state’s legality, but by the physical limit of their means. Ten cows can be raised on five acres, no more.

Furthermore, socialism does not account for the *telos* of the human person. If the government built an enormous factory where every citizen was instructed to turn one screw or turn one lever, the socialist would rub his hands and consider it a success. Plainly said, socialism does not detest large businesses in the same way a distributist does because they put the material goods before the good of the person. Pope Leo writes further, “Hence, it is clear that the main tenet of socialism, community of goods,

¹⁹ Pope Leo XIII “Rerum Novarum.” Vatican: the Holy Sea. Vatican Website. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1891. Web.



must be utterly rejected, since it only injures those whom it would seem meant to benefit, is directly contrary to the natural rights of mankind, and would introduce confusion and disorder into the commonweal. The first and most fundamental principle, therefore, if one would undertake to alleviate the condition of the masses, must be the inviolability of private property²⁰ .”

“Why Did You Doubt?”

Why this discourse on distributism? I have not forgotten the origin of this essay and the point will come around presently. The point is this: distributism sounds nice, but an *extremely few* people think that such a world will ever exist. They *doubt* that small business and community fellowship can ever be the law of the market so they will not sacrifice to create it. Most know that people do not want to farm their own land, they are afraid that giving the state as much power as distributism proposes is a slippery slope, yet perhaps the most obvious they see the large corporations now and those are not going away any time soon.

The latter challenge is something that G.K Chesterton encountered when these thoughts were new. However, Chesterton is quick to point out

²⁰ Ibid.



that these big businesses did not always exist so there is no reason to believe that they will last forever. Regarding corporations, he writes in *The Outline of Sanity*, “And in the course of calling the same thing impossible on Monday and inevitable on Tuesday, they have saved the life of the great gambler or robber twice over; first by calling a fabulous monster, and second by calling him an almighty fate.”²¹ In short, they have doubted that distributism is achievable, and they have despaired because of it.

Now, not all is lost. Like a proverbial Pandora’s box, there is a tiny glimmer of hope shining out in the oppressive dark despair that is the postmodern modern era. Democracy is a two-edged sword; while one edge, as already said, is the promulgation of doubt, the other is the promise of a savior. The system is designed so that it is continuously producing the “best of the best.” Term limits ensure that an elected official only has a short amount of time to do good, then there is an opportunity for a turnover, in which the people can look for new, better ideas. There is an intrinsic hunt for *someone* who can do *something*.

Lyndon B. Johnson rightly surmised how important voting is to the people when he said, “This right to vote is the basic right without which all others are meaningless. It gives people, people as individuals, control over

²¹ Chesterton, G.K., *The Outline of Sanity* (New York: Mead & Company, 1927) <http://www.gkc.org.uk/>



their own destinies.”²² This esteem placed in voting testifies to the intrinsic desire in people for a savior. No matter how much they might doubt that good can be done in the world, no matter how much they despair that there is so little good in it now, there is still something in the heart of every good natured person crying out that this is not the way things are supposed to be.

To Hope Against Hope

At this, it is my turn to doubt. Secularism still has that desire but has rejected all hitherto suggested heroes; not only Christ, but also Arthur and Aeneas. Instead they search in vain for someone (anyone) who will deliver them and remain confused when a promise falls short.

Secularism is searching for the redemption which Catholicism already promises and, until they recognize that, there will be no progress. They will raise up champion after champion *in aeternum* who, all things considered, are all just individuals facing giants. If responsibility is thrust upon an elected official, he stops being a statesman and becomes a sacrifice. It seems to have been forgotten that leaders only have power if those they lead give their consent and cooperation. Otherwise, it is (at best) a benevolent ruler

²² Johnson, Lyndon B. “Voting Rights Act,” Speech. U.S. Capitol Rotunda, August 6, 1965. “Voting Rights Act Media Kit.” LBJ Presidential Library.



dragging a reluctant and obstinate culture through the muck which it has made and in which it would be content to lay.

In other words, the only thing that can bring about change in society, can promulgate any general good is for people to cast off their doubt and despair and strive *themselves* for the good. They need to believe that their actions matter and stop passing the responsibility up to elected officials.

What will spur the culture to such a profound transformation in society? It is the acceptance of a hero who is neither faulting, failing nor fleeing. In short, it is Catholicism that has this desire for a hero fulfilled in Christ. A hero that has banished away doubt, liberated humanity from despair. And, unlike the elected officials who try their best, the foundations of Catholicism are entirely good, steadfast, and eternal. Their faith is founded upon hope that they have been saved from sins, but also given a profound dignity, elevated to magnificent place before God.

That is why Catholics can so confidently propose the impossible. With a straight face, they can say that they believe that people have the strength to make the sacrifices that distributism requires and that those sacrifices will have consequences. They know that they might not topple the horrors of capitalism by themselves, but they are “made in the image and likeness of God,” and, as such, distributism is *good* for them. At the very



least, they are willing to do the right thing because, even if no one ever notices, God sees, and He is well pleased. They can dream of a world without abortion because in the same breath they can say, “You will be a good mother; God will give you strength. You will be a good father, have faith!” The world, however, will not be so encouraging. They, honestly, do not consider forgoing contraceptives because they heed the voice that tells them “I love you without it.” Postmodernity does not speak with such confidence.

To the logic of the postmodern world, Catholic social teaching is unreasonable, but it is not impossible, not to a Catholic. Catholics refuse to doubt, refuse to give up because they are grounded in a true and eternal Savior. They are free; free from sin, of course, but also free to act *with confidence*. As surely as we believe in sin, we also believe that the good we do is meritorious. We believe that we have been given active roles to respond and achieve fulfilment. This means in all things, not only in the spiritual life.

We affirm that having a family is a good thing, both for the soul and for the economy. Faithfulness is good for a society and for salvation. What is good for the goose is good for the gander. Catholicism gives the faithful a sense of self-worth and an awareness of human dignity. It is why Catholics



are so sure that their actions are worth something, because they are convinced that *they* are worth something. How can someone with such confidence ever despair?