
This volume is the second in a series by Monahan chronicling the history of political thought in western Europe. Although the subtitle indicates that this is supposed to be a broad history of political thought covering the period, 1300-1600, that is not the case. This is a group of thematic approaches to Renaissance and Reformation intellectual history that, while having some interesting aspects, is not a comprehensive study. To understand the problems of *From Personal Duties Towards Personal Rights,* you must put it into the context of Monahan’s overall series.

According to the introduction, there is at least one further volume planned in the series that began with *Consent, Coercion and Limit: The Medieval Origins of Parliamentary Democracy* (1987). This first work examined the medieval political tradition, with special emphasis on the twelfth through fourteenth centuries. Monahan’s theme, as stated in the subtitle, was to trace the development of parliamentary democracy, not to survey the entire medieval political tradition. *Consent, Coercion and Limit* covered a considerable amount of material that might reasonably be expected to appear in the second book, so scholars who are not aware of Monahan’s first volume would find some disturbing lacunae if the second volume is read alone. (For instance, Marsilius of Padua, who appears as a marginal figure in *From Personal Duties Towards Personal Rights,* is featured prominently along with other fourteenth-century thinkers in the penultimate section of *Consent, Coercion and Limit*).

Similarly, as Monahan intends to continue this series in a third volume “whose primary focus will be theories of policy that are recognizably ‘scientific’” (p. 11) the cut-off date of 1600 is deceptive. Some important figures from the sixteenth century, Jean Bodin among them, are absent from this study. While the author’s justification for doing so seems sound, their absence is unexpected given the title’s promise.

*From Personal Duties Towards Personal Rights* also lacks the sharp focus of the first volume. Where earlier Monahan kept to the history of parliamentary democracy, in this volume he attempts to cover a number of approaches. He has abandoned the chronological approach of *Consent, Coercion and Limit,* where he treated the parliamentary thinkers century by century. *From Personal Duties Towards Personal Rights* favours a multi-thematic treatment of the material. Topics including civic republicanism, constitutionalism and the Reformation are useful organizing principles for the chapters, though, as Monahan admits, there are awkward gaps left to fill, as evinced by the separate section devoted to the Spanish neo-scholastics such as Vitoria and Suarez while also attempting to integrate humanist Juan Luis Vives into the same analysis—a less-than-successful proposition. Discussion of a few individual thinkers and their works constitutes the bulk of each section, after Monahan provides a broad context for that school of political thought. By arranging his material in thematic sections, Monahan categorizes the political thinkers into pigeonholes which are not
always a comfortable fit but at least are easy to access for the philosophers he has included. However, while the introduction and conclusion try to unite the book through the themes of duties and rights, that does not come through clearly in the text itself. Without a clear focus on a single theme or a well-developed sense of survey, Monahan’s work emerges more as a set of barely connected studies than a monograph.

He should be commended, however, for some of the ways in which From Personal Duties Towards Personal Rights revitalizes the history of early modern political thought by challenging assumptions and standing categories. The increased emphasis on the Spanish thinkers, for example, takes issue with the grandmaster of historico-political study, Quentin Skinner, whose two-volume The Foundation of Modern Political Thought (1978) remains the standard for Renaissance and Reformation studies. Skinner had emphasized the Spanish writers’ reactions against Lutheranism in studying their works; by treating them separately and on their own terms, Monahan makes a good case that “the members of the Spanish neo-scholastic school may not all have been as single-mindedly motivated in their political thinking by opposition to Reformation theology and political doctrine as he implies” (p. 130). In most other matters, however, Monahan concurs with or expands upon Skinner’s treatment.

Where Skinner and Monahan differ most dramatically is not in the treatment of these neo-scholastics, but in larger issues of scope and weight. Monahan’s theme, tracing a progression from obligation to opportunism in the political arena, has meant that some figures and philosophies are ignored or given short shrift. England’s contribution is subsumed into a discussion of Richard Hooker (pp. 273-293), with no attention given to other important figures such as John Fortescue and Thomas Smith. Monahan obviously hopes to make up this lack in his astonishing bibliography which accounts for more than a quarter of the book’s length. The bibliography is extensive, giving citations for Fortescue, Smith and others who figure little in the body of Monahan’s work. Unfortunately, the same care lavished on the bibliography is not evident in the index, where careless errors emerge (as in the creation of George Trevor-Report from a misread footnote on p. 121) and the scope is limited.

However, when taken on the terms which Monahan lays out in his introduction, as a thematic approach to several topics in the political thought of western Europe from the Renaissance into the Reformation, From Personal Duties Towards Personal Rights can be a useful book. Monahan’s treatment of individual figures such as Pierre d’Ailly, Francisco de Vitoria and Philippe du Plessis Mornay is insightful and informative. His rehabilitation of the Spanish neo-scholastics is the most exciting part of the work. But if the reader seeks a comprehensive guide to European political thought for this period, he or she is better advised to look elsewhere.

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