

*Thomas Aquinas*  
**The various forms of lordship or government**

But where matters are directed towards some end, there may be one way of proceeding which is right and another which not right; and so we find that the government of a community can be directed both rightly and not rightly. Now something is directed rightly when it is led to its proper end, and not rightly when it is led to an end which is not proper to it. But the end proper to a community of free men is different from that of slaves. For a free man is one who is the master of his own actions, whereas a slave, insofar as he is a slave, is the property of another. If, therefore, a community of free men is ordered by a ruler in such a way as to secure the common good, such rule will be right and just inasmuch as it is suitable to free men. If, however, the government is directed not towards the common good but towards the private good of the ruler, rule of this kind will be unjust and perverted; and such rulers are warned by the Lord at Ezekiel, where He says: 'Woe be to the shepherds that do feed themselves' – because they seek only gain for themselves. 'Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?' Shepherds must seek the good of their flock, and all rulers the good of the community subject to them.

If, therefore, government is exercised unjustly by one man alone, who, in ruling, seeks gain for himself and not the good of the community subject to him, such a ruler is called a tyrant, a name derived from [the Greek word τυραννίς, which means] 'force', because he oppresses with power, and does not rule with justice. Hence, among the ancients all men of power were called 'tyrants'. If, however, unjust government is exercised not by one but by several, when this

is done by a few it is called 'oligarchy', that is, 'rule by the few'; and this comes about when, by reason of their wealth, the few oppress the people, and it differs from tyranny only with respect to number. Again, if wrongful government is exercised by the many, this is named 'democracy', that is, 'rule by the people'; and this comes about when the common people oppress the rich by force of numbers. In this way the whole people will be like a single tyrant.

*The treatise 'De  
regimine principum'  
or 'De regno'  
Book I, Chapter II*

Similarly, it is proper to distinguish the various kinds of just government. For if the administration is in the hands of a certain section of the community [aliquam multitudinem], as when the military class [multitudo bellatorum] governs a city or province, this is commonly called polity. If, again, administration is in the hands of a few but virtuous men, rule of this kind is called aristocracy: that is, 'the best rule', or 'rule of the best men' [optimorum], who for this reason are called aristocrats [optimates]. And if just government belongs to one man alone, he is properly called a king. Hence the Lord, at Ezekiel 37:24 says: 'And David my servant shall be king over them, and they all shall have one shepherd.' It is clearly shown by this verse that it is the nature of kingship that there should be one who rules, and that he should be a shepherd who seeks the common good and not his own gain.

Now since it is fitting for man to live in a community because he would not be able to provide all the necessities of life for himself were he to remain alone, it must be that a society of many men will be perfect to the extent that it is self-sufficient in the

necessaries of life. The self-sufficient life is certainly present to some extent in the family of one household, with respect, that is, to the natural activities of nourishment and the procreation of children and other things of this kind; and one locality may be sufficient in all those things belonging to a particular trade; and a city, which is a perfect [i.e. a complete] community, is sufficient in all the necessaries of life.

But this is all the more true of a single province, because of the need for common defence and mutual assistance against enemies. Hence, he who rules a perfect community, that is, a city or province, is properly called a king; but he who rules a household is not a king, but the father of a family. He does, however, bear a certain resemblance to a king, and for this reason kings are sometimes called the ‘fathers’ of

their people.

From what we have said, therefore, it is clear that a king is one who rules over the community of a city or province, and for the common good. Hence Solomon, at Ecclesiastes 5:7 says: ‘The king commands all the lands subject to him.’

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